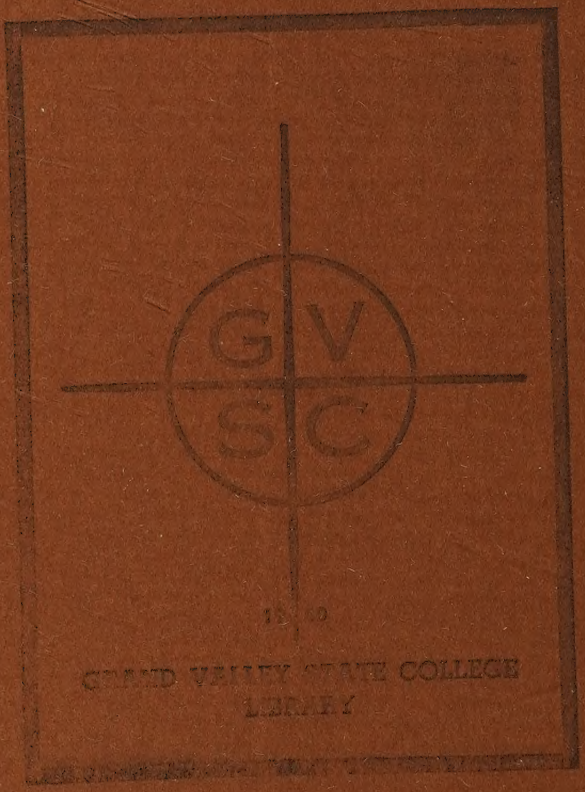
Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens

By George Gissing



Laura B. Koch
515

WITHDRAWN

CRITICAL STUDIES OF THE WORKS OF CHARLES DICKENS

This edition, on suède finish paper, printed from type, is limited to 1,500 copies.

THIS COPY IS NUMBER 22

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/bwb_T4-ALC-822

Photo, Elliot & Fry

GEORGE GISSING

CRITICAL STUDIES OF THE WORKS OF CHARLES DICKENS

BY

GEORGE GISSING

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND BIBLIOGRAPHY
OF GISSING BY TEMPLE SCOTT

1924
GREENBERG, PUBLISHER, INC.
NEW YORK

PR
4588
.G5

Copyright, 1924, by
GREENBERG, PUBLISHER, INC.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
The Quinn & Boden Company
BOOK MANUFACTURERS
RAHWAY NEW JERSEY

10970

CONTENTS

	PAGE
Introduction	1
Sketches by Boz	14
The Pickwick Papers	30
Oliver Twist	43
Nicholas Nickleby	58
Martin Chuzzlewit	72
Dombey and Son	89
Barnaby Rudge	103
The Old Curiosity Shop	119
Bleak House	136
Dickens in Memory	151
Bibliography of George Gissing	159

Publisher's Note—This compilation of Gissing's last literary work has been printed by arrangement with Messrs. Methuen & Co., of London, the publishers of the Rochester Edition of the works of Charles Dickens, for which the essays were originally written as introductions, only six, however, appearing in print.

INTRODUCTION

GEORGE GISSING has been called an "inverted idealist" and also an "inverted sentimentalist." What Mr. Morley Roberts and Mr. Frank Swinnerton may have meant by these phrases may be better understood when we realize that these writers condemned Gissing as a disappointed and frustrated man in life, and as a mistaken realist in art. It is unfortunate that Gissing found a friend and a critic who, with every good intention to do him justice, somehow or other found themselves more interested in their own states of mind than they were in the man they were writing about. Gissing's idealism may have brought him many disappointments, and Gissing's sentimentality may have earned for him many hard knocks, but the fact remains that the man lived a courageous life despite his untoward experiences, and that through all the dark days of his exile and poverty he struggled manfully and even successfully, and never lost faith in the goodness of things.

It is not my purpose to enter here into the details of Gissing's life and his travails. Any treatment of them is apt to lead one into by-ways of speculation which would only serve to express one's self rather than reveal the man. Even so judicious and fair-minded a writer as Mr. Thomas Seccombe

has been tempted to speak of Gissing's "amorous propensities" and "a curious inability to do the sane and secure thing in ordinary affairs of life." Both these qualities undoubtedly played some part in Gissing's "frustration," but surely a very subordinate part, when we seriously review the work Gissing did in his comparatively short career as a man of letters.

It is a fact, as it is of every healthy man, that Gissing had a need of a natural satisfaction for a natural desire, and it is also a fact, as it has been of many other men, that his attempts to satisfy the desire proved him to be an idealist of an extreme kind; but it is equally a fact that the disappointments which his idealism brought him were endured by him in no craven's spirit, but rather with a touch of heroism, and certainly with the worthiness of a gentleman. This is evident even in the distressing biography which his friend Mr. Morley Roberts was unfriendly enough to write of him. Few men so unfitted for a hand-to-hand struggle with the material world, and so unbalanced, as we are asked to believe he was, could have emerged from the inevitable entanglements with so sweet a disposition and so abidingly faithful a heart as did the author of "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft."

Gissing flourished, using the term in its botanical and not in any economic sense, in an age which had begun to lose interest in priceless things, and was becoming enamored of things with a price. It was the beginning of the age of Business, Industry and

Labor. From his nature things with a price would have little or no passionate interest for Gissing. He was essentially a student, a man who found his highest pleasures in the exercitations of the intellect and the divagations of emotions called up by a past which was haloed by antique glory. He was a bookman in the true sense of the word; a scholar with a true scholar's love for the classics and humanistic learning.

"It is a joy," he writes in his last years, "to go through booksellers' catalogues, ticking here and there a possible purchase. Formerly, when I could seldom spare money, I kept catalogues as much as possible out of sight; now I savour them page by page, and make a pleasant virtue of the discretion I must needs impose upon myself. But greater still is the happiness of unpacking volumes which one has bought without seeing them. I am no hunter of rarities; I care nothing for first editions and for tall copies; what I buy is literature, food for the soul of man. The first glimpse of bindings when the inmost protective wrapper has been folded back! The first scent of *books!* The first gleam of a gilded title! Here is a work the name of which has been known to me for half a lifetime, but which I never yet saw; I take it reverently in my hand, gently I open it; my eyes are dim with excitement as I glance over chapter-headings, and anticipate the treat which awaits me. . . . At the time when I was literally starving in London, when it seemed impossible that I should ever gain a living by my pen, how many days have I spent

at the British Museum, reading as disinterestedly as if I had been without a care! It astounds me to remember that, having breakfasted on dry bread, and carrying in my pocket another piece of bread to serve for dinner, I settled myself at a desk in the great Reading-Room with books before me which by no possibility could be a source of immediate profit. . . . My hunger was forgotten; the garret to which I must return to pass the night never perturbed my thoughts. On the whole, it seems to me something to be rather proud of; I smile approvingly at that thin, white-faced youth. Me? My very self? No, no! He has been dead these thirty years. . . . To the end I shall be reading—and forgetting. Ah, that's the worst of it! Had I at command all the knowledge I have at any time possessed, I might call myself a learned man. Nothing surely is so bad for the memory as long-enduring worry, agitation, fear. I cannot preserve more than a few fragments of what I read, yet read I shall, persistently, rejoicingly. Would I gather erudition for a future life? Indeed, it no longer troubles me that I forget. I have the happiness of the passing moment, and what more can mortal ask?" *

It was this gentle-spirited man, this delicate plant of perfume nursed in a still-remaining old-world garden, despised by Industry and Business, that found itself homeless and a wanderer in search of mere sustenance. Somehow or other life must be satisfied for the purpose of living at all, and to obtain the food and the lodging necessary from a

* *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft.*

world in which he was an alien, and from which he had also, in a sense, exiled himself, the idealist offered in exchange the things which he thought were priceless. Of course, Gissing suffered poverty.

He began writing for a living when the novel had become the most profitable form of literary wares, and he no doubt felt that he could supply such wares not, perhaps, of the quality which Dickens had supplied and which Hardy was then supplying, but, at any rate, of sufficient interest and workmanlike accomplishment to earn for them a market sufficiently remunerative to enable him to make a living. He did manage, but only just managed, to make a living by means of these novels. I have no doubt at all that the prices paid to Gissing by the publishers were, at that time, a fairly accurate estimate of the profit-making possibilities of his books. I question if any of the publishers made as much out of their publication as Gissing did out of their writing. The truth is that Gissing was not a novelist, and the reading public realized it. There is no better critic of a good story than the public, and the fact that the public did not read Gissing's novels is as telling a criticism of the novelist as can well be cited. I have no doubt at all that Gissing realized his own failings to achieve distinction in this form of literary art; but as any other form in which he could express himself would find no market at all he was compelled to do the best he could. The urge in him to creative activity

and even the product of that activity, imperfect as it was, is a fulfilling answer to those who would condemn the man as a futilitarian.

Gissing's nature was essentially that of a poet. His appreciation of life was a spiritual and not a dramatic one. Life's drama—its tragedy and its comedy—seemed to him to be pivoted on poverty. It was his own personal experience and his own reaction to it which he envisaged whenever he dealt with life and character concretely, and every novel he wrote presents some phase of that experience and that reaction to it. In every other respect he saw life at second-hand, through the mind of the thinker and the student of books and through the eyes of an onlooker, of the man removed by nature from brotherly intercourse with the common people of the crowds.

"Every instinct of my being," he writes, "is anti-democratic, and I dread to think of what an England may become when Demos rules irresistibly."

Unlike his master, Dickens, he had not that abounding sympathy which is almost love. He was not a teller of tales; he had not the temperament nor did he have the imagination which could beguile a listener to laughter or tears or elevate him to awe. He knew the joy of life, but the knowledge came to him not out of its hurly-burly and the rough play born of the mere zest of living, but through contemplation and the quiet appreciation of the beauty of nature. He was almost altogether blind to its humor. Loud talk irritated him;

the shouts of the market-places unstrung him. Nevertheless, he could be deeply moved and greatly enhanced when both the tragedy and the comedy of the interplay of human beings were presented to him by the masterly powers of such a genius as Charles Dickens. Left to himself he saw these as in a camera obscura or as on a moving-picture screen.

It was just because he lacked the gifts which Dickens possessed that he was so ardent a lover of him and so enthusiastic a student of his works. He acknowledged with unstinted admiration the magical powers of the creator of Sam Weller, Micawber, Pecksniff and his daughters, Mrs. Gamp and the rest of the people who have their being in Dickens's world. There is not in English literature a more fulfilling estimate of the writings of Dickens than Gissing's critical study of him, which is at once finely judicious and delicately appreciative. It is also written with gracious distinction, as befitted the man of letters for whom the art of writing was almost an act of worship. Though writing for a living, Gissing was never the professional, but always the amateur in love with his art; even when writing in a stone-floored cellar on a filthy deal table by the light that came through a flat grating from an alley above. It is as a man of letters that Gissing must be rightly considered. His three books—"Charles Dickens," "By the Ionian Sea" and "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft"—which he wrote for his own pleasure,

will tell more of the man—what he was to himself and what he will be for others—than all the other twenty-five books he wrote for a living.

This volume contains nine papers which Gissing wrote as introductions to Dickens's novels. Not all of them have been printed previously, and they are now collected as an adjunct to his critical study of Dickens, and to give the reader the benefit of a rare insight into the work of a rare genius. If the writings of Dickens can ever become out of fashion, I am sure these estimates of them will help to stave off such a calamity. For Gissing has something new and fresh and fruitfully revealing to tell us of what it is that Dickens did for the world by giving it his books.

> "Dickens's service to civilization," he writes in his introduction to "Oliver Twist," "by the liberality of his thought, cannot be too much insisted upon. The atmosphere of that age was a stifling Puritanism. 'I have been very happy for some years,' says Mrs. Maylie; 'too happy perhaps. It may be time that I should meet with some misfortune.' Against the state of mind declared in this amazing utterance, Dickens instinctively rebels; he believed in happiness, in its moral effect, and in the right of all to have their share of it. Forced into contemplation of the gloomiest aspects of human existence, his buoyant spirit would not be held in darkness; as his art progressed, it dealt more gently with oppressive things. . . . It was by virtue of his ever hopeful outlook that Dickens became such a force for good."

Gissing points to Dickens's love for the ancient—of that tradition that makes for permanence of the best thought and the best efforts. He emphasized his love for the country, different from that of Wordsworth but akin to that of Chaucer. Dickens's imagination, he says, always works most successfully upon uncouth material; his art is primarily concerned with the underbred. The uncouth and the underbred, remarks Gissing, plays so vast a part in human life that to neglect them is to falsify; but only the rarest genius can turn them to every-day use, by exhibiting their manifold significance in the light of mirth or of compassion. Then again Dickens was a radical, but his radicalism would change the world morally; socially Dickens was a conservative, for his English spirit knows nothing of egalitarianism. To the criticism that Dickens was too emotional, Gissing answers that it is only by emotion that life can be translated into art. "Sentimentality is a mark of the great semi-educated class from which Dickens sprang and to which, unconsciously, he so often addressed himself."

To the charge of exaggeration Gissing explains that Dickens was a born actor. If many of his characters seemed to be unreal they are yet real in the dramatic play of the story. They are consistent with themselves, and are absolutely native to the world in which Dickens makes them live. In the last edition of "Martin Chuzzlewit" issued during the author's lifetime, Dickens himself an-

swers this charge in his preface. "What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions is plain truth to another." He questions whether it is always the writer who colors highly, or whether it is now and then the reader whose eye for color is a little dull. In the introduction to "Martin Chuzzlewit" here printed, Gissing comments on this:

> "Of course the novelist was right; he has given us essential proof, choosing his own method for making it plain. Reflect on the laws of fiction. Into a page the writer must concentrate what in nature is boundless; his business is not to report life in extenso, but to convey to another mind some impression which it has made upon his own. If he do this honestly and capably, then his work is *true*. A novelist can give only one aspect of a thing, that which at the moment it presents to him; in Pecksniff and Sarah Gamp, who to another beholder might have been tedious, offensive, monstrous, he saw matter for infinite jest, and the proof that he saw truly lies in the eager acceptance of his pictures by mankind at large. For all art is relative to the human mind; apart from that sanction it will be meaningless. One cannot easily explain why a drunken hypocrite who urges us to be moral and to contemplate existence should minister to our delight; nor why a loathsome creature who, under a guise of sick nursing, ill treats and robs her patients, should be to us a joy forever; we only know that by a certain art this effect can be produced, and that Dickens had the art in perfection."

Perhaps one of the best things Gissing ever wrote is his appreciation of Mrs. Gamp. He devotes three pages to her in his critical study of Dickens, and the reader of those pages may easily judge for himself the kind of "inverted idealist" or "inverted sentimentalist" Gissing was. At any rate, if the fountain springs of humor had not their sources in himself, it is certain he could be drunk like a gentleman when he quaffed its waters when offered him by the hand of another. He returns to this lady in the present volume and after the lapse of fourteen years we find him still under the elevating influence so engagingly evinced when he wrote the "critical study":

> "To describe Mrs. Gamp as the incarnation of vulgarity would be true, but inadequate; representing vulgarity in its essence, she is also vulgar in a special mode, and, what is more, vulgar through the medium of a strong individuality. No painful observer of her class could, by mere literal faithfulness, have transferred to paper this thick-gurgling flux of talk; knowing the lingo, we recognize it upon her lips, but at the same time we know that we never before listened to Mrs. Gamp; fortune never led us into this odorous presence until we were introduced to her by Dickens. Sensual grossness, luring shrewdness, the callousness of base experience, could not conceivably find fitter utterance. Compare her speech with that of Betsy Prig, in many respects a woman of the same stamp, but altogether lacking in originality, of poorer spirit, of thinner blood; Betsy's talk is mere acrid commonplace,

the meanness of everyday. Read the quarrel scene between these two, one of Dickens's great things, and contrast the crude personalities wherein Mrs. Prig gives voice to her acrimony with the figured phrase, the pointed anecdote, the inimitable *hapax legomena,* which go to express Mrs. Gamp's indignation. This amazing creature is, in her way, a humorist; she throws out in panting parentheses little sketches of the life familiar to her, which show the amused observer. 'Which Mr. Harris, who was dreadful timid, went and stopped his ears in a empty dog-kennel, and never took his hands away or come out once till he was showed the baby, w'en being took with fits, the doctor collared him and laid him on his back upon the airy stones, and she was told to ease her mind, his 'owls was organs.' Read her conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Mould in their parlor; admire her vein of bantering facetiousness and its effect upon the hearers. Nay, so superabundant is her facility in the way of discourse that she had been led to invent an imaginary friend, a supposed constant interlocutrix, whose remarks, faithfully reported, lend graceful variety to her self-praise and her compliments. Great in herself, Mrs. Gamp becomes greater still as the author of Mrs. Harris. 'I says to Mrs. Harris only t'other day, the last Monday evening fortnight as ever dawned upon this Pilgrim's Projiss of a mortal wale—' Of a truth Dickens has here achieved the incredible; the material was beneath contempt; in no small degree even loathsome. In his hands it became a new delight, unique and imperishable."

What Gissing failed to accomplish in his novels, he more than made up for, as a man of letters, in what he did for Dickens in his "critical study" and these introductions, and in what he did for himself in "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft." In these the man reveals himself, as indeed he does in many parts of his novels, as a being of cloistered virtues, an onlooker on life. "That salt kiss of the sea air," which he once tasted as a child, he never felt again. He came to have a sorry dread of nature's clouds, her winds, and found that he had to walk with tedious circumspection where once he ran and leapt exultingly. "I am much older in body than in mind! I can but look at what I once enjoyed." He kept on looking right on through life and he never again really enjoyed it. But despite his frustration, the words Carlyle wrote of Dickens on hearing he was dead, words with which Gissing concludes his study of his master, may well be applied with a slight change to Gissing himself:

> "The good, the gentle, high-gifted, ever-friendly, noble Gissing—every inch of him a gentleman."

TEMPLE SCOTT.

SKETCHES BY BOZ

DICKENS'S first piece of original writing which got into print appeared in 1833, when he was not quite twenty-two years old. It was a sketch entitled *A Dinner at Poplar Walk,* republished later as *Mr. Minns and His Cousin.* He sent it, as an unknown contributor, to a magazine called the *Old Monthly,* and its acceptance gave him the keenest joy he had ever known. Already for more than two years he had worked as press reporter in the gallery of the House of Commons and elsewhere, but this mere livelihood was far from satisfying his ambition; he had often thought of the stage, and even gone through a good deal of hard, methodical work with a view of training himself for that career. The publication of his story—which so delighted him that as he tells us, he walked for half an hour about Westminster Hall, his eyes "so dimmed with joy and pride that they could not bear the street, and were not fit to be seen there"—fixed his mind in the right direction. Though the *Old Monthly* paid him nothing, he contributed nine more sketches, anonymous save the last two, which were signed "Boz"—a jocose nasal abridgment of "Moses" (in the *Vicar of Wakefield*), wherewith Dickens had nicknamed one of his brothers before he assumed it as his own literary signature. Such matter was too

attractive to remain long without market value; an evening edition of the *Morning Chronicle* (for which paper he reported) continued the publication of his sketches, with an increase of the young journalist's salary from five guineas a week to seven. At length, in 1836, a publisher bought the copyright of these collected pieces, and issued them in two volumes as *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People.*

It is amusing (and more than that) to read in Dickens's first published story that Mr. Minns had "a good and increasing salary, in addition to some £10,000 of his own, invested in the funds." One recalls the wretched poverty of the author's childhood, his slavery as a little boy in the blacking warehouse, the wonderful energy by which he had raised himself in a few years from the position of attorney's office-lad to that of a reporter without rival in the press gallery, and one thinks of the tremulous hopes with which he set down to write of Mr. Minns and his £10,000. Forster quotes for us (*Life of Dickens,* Bk. I, Chap. 4) the letter in which Dickens applied to the editor of the *Chronicle* for increase of payment on his contributing original work, and the extreme modesty of its wording, the scrupulous care with which he guards himself against the appearance of urging an unreasonable claim, excite a smile in view of the brilliant success so soon to come to him. Dickens would have been successful in any line of life; he had, besides his "shaping spirit of imagination," all the practical qualities which

make a man prosperous. But his rapid rise to fame and fortune by means of a book or two which described the world as he saw it in his obscure youth has an exhilarating interest scarcely to be paralleled in the biography of men of letters. It was well for him, and for all, that his triumph came so speedily. A difference of tone which we at once remark on passing from the *Sketches* to *Pickwick* must not be attributed solely to the natural ripening of his powers; that exuberance of animation, that joyous exercise of happiest faculties which give *Pickwick* its perennial value, was due in great measure to the burst of sunshine which had gladdened the writer's heart. Imagine a Dickens who had to strive for half a lifetime against neglect; would his gift to the heedless world have been the same as that he offered in the plenitude of grateful delight?

This collection of *Sketches* no longer makes much appeal to the ordinary reader; its interest (apart from literary criticism) is mainly historical, and from that point of view it has considerable value. There we have a picture of (I will not say English, but) London life at the beginning of the Victorian era, the life of the lower classes of society, that is to say, of the folk who constitute the mass of the population, yet leave no record of themselves in formal chronicle. With few exceptions the people dealt with belong to a rank between that of the educated citizen and the order of wage-earners; they are the inhabitants of the lower world of "business,"

whose work does not soil their hands, and who, on that account, lay claim to a place on the edge of gentility. This, of course, was the world to which Dickens belonged, by birth and breeding; it is the peculiar merit of his earliest work that he writes of things intimately known to him, writes of them, moreover, with abundant sympathy, notwithstanding his occasional attitude of moralist. For the first time, a member of this class has become conscious and vocal, capable of looking about him with intelligent observation and of describing with remarkable veracity all he sees. As such endowments were very little to be expected amid that dull and gross multitude, Dickens's voice, as soon as it made itself heard, drew an attention which was in great part surprise. The reading public (a term of narrow application in those days) felt, first of all, a certain astonishment at finding themselves interested in such trivial themes, and were still more surprised that their interest could be excited by an author who made no pretension to what was called intellectual standing. Indeed, the outlook of Boz was notably restricted; he seemed to live wholly among the people he described; nowhere in his writing is there any suggestion of acquaintance with a social order above the vulgar. His own superiority to the subjects of his sketches seems to consist only in certain mental qualities, above all in his power of humorous appreciation and in the vivid attention with which he regards everything around him. Never had been known such absorbing inter-

est in the commonplace. The volume opens with a series of papers on "Our Parish." It is no rural parish, amid beautiful surroundings, suggestive of idyllic story and possibly of romance; but a semi-squalid district somewhere on the outskirts of London, roads of monotonous ugliness, streets and by-ways remarkable only for degrees of discomfort and dirt and sordid struggle. The inhabitants presented to us are in complete harmony with their circumstances—paltry officials, old maids living meanly on small incomes, fussy leaders of local society, clerical inanities; nothing more ignobly "parochial" could be imagined. Yet the writer is engrossed in his topic; treats it lovingly—his spirit of jest never for a moment interfering with the seriousness of his purpose, which is to make us see and understand the things to him so familiar. After the Parish sketches come glimpses of the general life of London, still on its poorer side: descriptions of notable streets and localities, of holiday resorts, of the haunts of crime and misery. We go into public-houses and pawnshops, visit popular theatres, are led over Newgate. The rest of the book is filled with sketches of typical characters, and with little stories illustrating vulgar life.

Every page reminds us how the outside of things has changed during the last sixty years. The London of that day was decidedly more picturesque than now; its citizens presented more variety of costume, with freer indulgence of the taste for colour. A bricklayer leaning against a post in his

Sunday clothes wears a blue coat, long yellow waistcoat and Blucher boots. A "gentleman" at a boarding-house sits down to dinner in a maroon-coloured dress coat, with velvet collar and cuffs. A bridegroom wears a light-blue coat, with "double-milled Kersay pantaloons." Trousers of the cloth known as "shepherd's plaid" are often mentioned, and in the matter of waistcoats great variety of hue was permitted. The wheel traffic of the streets, with stage-coaches, glass-coaches, hackney-coaches, tells of a time very remote from ours; well-to-do men commonly rode to business on horseback; cabriolets were just going out of use, and omnibuses just coming in. Great, too, are the changes in the social characteristics of the world with which Dickens is concerned; increase of wealth and advance of education have complicated the conditions of life in the lower middle class, putting a much greater distance between its representatives at the two extremes. Vulgarity of manners made, in that day, a more obvious link than now beyond the clerk or shopboy and the thriving tradesman. It would not be easy to make a less attractive presentment of the everyday life of a people than that which Dickens has here set forth; and his picture is the more impressive for its being quite without malice. The men and women he shows us are thoroughly human; they do not lack elementary virtues; yet the impression they leave is one of gross ignorance combined with bumptiousness, of coarseness and dullness, fortified by obstinacy, of pretentious-

ness hidebound in snobbery. In our time these are still the rooted characteristics of a large class of English people, but they have no longer such free play; a new criterion of life and demeanour interferes to a great extent with the inherent tendencies of this social type. There is no reason whatever to doubt Dickens's fidelity in portraiture; we have abundant confirmation of the truth of what he shows us, and, on laying down his *Sketches,* it is natural to ask the question: could a writer whose mission was to mock at conceited stupidity, to assail pernicious humbug, possibly have been born among a people and in a time which afforded him richer scope for his genius? Putting aside certain pages of rather forced pathos or of deliberate gloom (such as "Our Next-door Neighbour," "The Black Veil," "The Drunkard's Death"), the volume contains hardly a person or a scene not provocative of just ridicule and contempt. To say that Dickens was quite aware of this is in no way to contradict the statement that he writes sympathetically of his chosen subjects. Consciousness of knowledge and power made him delight in the material which he could best use. Let him step ever so little beyond his familiar ground, and the failure of sympathy, consequently of effect, becomes at once evident. The *Sketches* are the early, immature work of a great humourist and satirist. The eye is there, and the ability to depict what it sees; but the finer spirit which will direct observation, inspire the artist's work, is not quite awakened. From the material

he is collecting, he chooses only that which is easiest of treatment, with the result that we feel an elementariness in his view of things, however truthful it be within the limits thus imposed.

With a knowledge of the *Sketches* alone, it would not be possible to forecast Dickens's greater work. One would see the promise of an original novelist, but several of the leading traits which mark his position in English literature are barely, if at all, suggested by this youthful writing. Excellent as are these little pictures of grimy or dreary London, they do not affect us with that peculiar sense of imaginative vision which is the note of his best books, that unique power of picturesque suggestiveness which enabled Dickens to create a London previously unknown, and to make it part of the mind of his readers. With his observation there already mingles, indeed, a characteristic strain of fancy, as in the paper on Monmouth Street, but the true Dickens note is not yet sounded, the atmosphere through which London will appear to him and to us has not yet come into existence. To say this is to mark the absence of that distinctive power which —notwithstanding the associations of the word— may best be described as melodramatic; that picturesqueness of action which is the complement of Dickens's descriptive magic. Read "The Black Veil" or "The Drunkard's Death," and you feel that they might have been written by any one; whereas, at a later time, such narratives would have been stamped in every line with the author's per-

sonality. Sadly as Dickens was led astray, now and then, by his melodramatic impulses, it is none the less one of his great qualities; in the best moments, it enables him to give tragic significance to the commonplace, and all through his finer work it helps to produce what one may call a romantic realism, the charm of his books considered merely as stories. Then again, we nowhere in the *Sketches* meet with that playful tenderness which recurs to the mind as often as we think of *David Copperfield* or *Dombey and Son.* It could not be here; it is not found in *Pickwick;* Dickens was too young to experience the emotion which uttered itself so delightfully in some of his ripest pages. Compassion he felt and expressed, yet here too, as was inevitable, the pathetic intention has too much emphasis, and too little originality. Where he touches upon the sorrows of girls and women, especially those whom misery had condemned to vice, we are reminded of the unfortunate turn for sentimentality which he was never to overcome. For the very reason, however, which otherwise works to its disadvantage, the book of *Sketches* is in this regard less open to objection than the novels.

Is it not a strange and interesting fact that, in this first production of a man of genius, among the numerous and various persons he has selected for portraiture, there occurs not a single example of female beauty and delightfulness? If the males of this order of society are fairly to be characterised in terms such as I have used, it is certain that their

mothers, sweethearts, wives and daughters, in every respect correspond to them; with the exception of a few poor downtrodden creatures, starved, misused, every female in the book is more or less contemptible. The exceptions do not for a moment convince us; the drunkards' wives who bend meekly to a blow, the street-walkers who readily burst into tears, are merely conventional figures; on the other hand, the throng of silly or ill-tempered or cunning or avaricious and always unspeakably vulgar women who fill these pages are obviously true to reality, not for a moment to be denied by anyone who has a slight acquaintance with London lower life in our own day. Must we regard it as an idiosyncrasy of Dickens that, in his most impressionable years, he took this view of the other sex—a view which submitted only to a few modifications throughout his life? Or did it result from his origin in a certain class, and his birth in a certain time? Mr. Robert Bridges, in his essay on Keats (prefixed to the edition of that poet in the Muses' Library), has some interesting remarks which bear upon this question; speaking of Keats's conception of women, its shallowness and feebleness, he reminds us that this is common to most writers in the early part of our century, and especially marked in those who were of humble birth. Dickens, it is plain, utterly lacked romantic passion, as we understand the term; in that respect he doubtless belonged to his class and his time, and even the possession of literary genius did not on this ground

separate him from ordinary men. Keats, with all his glorious imagination, could not, in poetry, shape anything better than the feebly sentimental type of woman, and in life became the victim of a damsel whose name seems to have been admirably suited to her personality—one thinks of her as a sort of "Flora" (in *Little Dorrit*). No doubt the poet with his early experience of life in London would have recognized the entire verisimilitude of Dickens's female world, where girls known as "young ladies" have but two ways of manifesting strong emotion—to fall into a simulated swoon, or to scratch the faces of those who offend them. Granting the facetious spirit in which such persons and scenes are described, they have a significance serious enough when we are viewing Dickens's work as material for social history. Is there any instance in the literature of other countries of an imaginative author whose early work conveys such an impression of the society in which he had grown up?

In the general treatment of their themes, the *Sketches* have more of simple realism than the later books; we are reminded of the young journalist that their author then was, rather than of the novelist he would soon become. Here we find nothing of the optimism which delighted his contemporaries, and is still an enduring cause of Dickens's popularity. Miserable people are miserable to the bitter end; no benevolent old gentleman goes about relieving distress and making everyone as hilarious as

himself; it is the mere truth we are called upon to see and deplore. Read, for instance, the story of the "Broker's Man" with its descriptions of starving families and of all the evil that results from suffering. Of one mother it is said that "misery had changed her to a devil. If you had heard how she cursed the little naked children as were rolling on the floor, and seen how savagely she struck the infant when it cried with hunger, you'd have shuddered as much as I did." Or turn to the sketch of a Private Theatre. All the foolishness and squalor and harm of the thing is insisted upon, with nothing of that large and tolerant spirit of mirth which, at a later time, would have shown these stage-stricken shop-boys in quite another light. The amateur actors are "donkeys who are persuaded to pay for the permission to exhibit their lamentable ignorance and embryoism on the stage"; the audience consists of "a motley group of dupes and blackguards." Compare "The Boarding House" with that immortal establishment presided over by Mrs. Todgers; the difference is not only one of power, but of spirit. For literal truth, there can be no doubt that the boarding-house as sketched by Boz takes precedence of that which illumines the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It was natural enough that Dickens, in after years, spoke very slightingly of his first book. If ever he glanced at it, he must have felt as though he were reading the work of some one who treated his own subjects without his own ability to give them value.

Those to whom the *Sketches* revealed a new writer saw in them many merits which to us are obscured; they broke entirely new ground, were written in a new style, and, despite their frouzy topics, seemed to bring a refreshing breath of reality into the literary atmosphere. Nowadays, the best parts of the book seem to be those which are purely descriptive. Remembering how rare a thing is the ability to depict, really to depict, in words and especially to make interesting a description of the every-day, the commonplace, we gladly recognize in Boz's handwork the first proofs of Dickens's extraordinary power. Probably he was right when he said that his early success was largely due "to the wholesome training of severe newspaper work," and that not only because of the knowledge with which it supplied him, but quite as much because it taught him how to put into straightforward words what he saw or thought. The descriptions in the *Sketches* are never long, but they contain a wonderful amount of detail, and the details selected are always just the right ones, the essential, the effective. Read the page in which he shows us London streets at early morning in bad winter weather ("The Early Coach"). In simplest possible language the wretched discomfort of the hour and scene are brought before us, so that we shudder as we read. Or the paper on London streets at night—one of the best things in the book. There is "just enough damp gently stealing down to make the pavement greasy, without cleansing it of any of its impuri-

ties," and "the heavy, lazy mist, which hangs over every object makes the gas-lamps look brighter." We see the Kidney-pie merchant, who has vainly tried to keep his candle lit against the wind, and the only signs of whose whereabouts are "the bright sparks, of which a long irregular train is whirled down the street every time he opens his portable oven"; the grocers' windows, the loafing ragamuffins, the "little chandler's shop with the cracked bell behind the door, whose melancholy tinkling is regulated by the demand for quarterns of sugar and half-ounces of coffee." We hear "the constant clinking of pattens on the slippery and uneven pavement," and the "rustling of umbrellas as the wind blows." The policeman, buttoned up in oil-skin cape, "holds his hat on his head, and turns round to avoid the gust of wind and rain which drives against him at the street corner." All this is the very life, and could not possibly be presented with more clearness to our mental vision. Still minuter observation is frequent; as when we have descriptions of door-knockers in all their variety; or are told that a fruit-pie maker "displayed on his well-scrubbed window-board large white compositions of flour and dripping, ornamented with pink stains, giving rich promise of the fruit within." (Cannot we feel sure that the poor hungry little boy named Charles Dickens had many a time cast a longing eye upon such dainties?) Or note the passing remark that "a toast-master's shirt-front, waistcoat and neckerchief always exhibit three dis-

tinct shades of cloudy white"—where humour transforms the trivial and gives it value.

On the whole, there is much more of the satiric spirit in these pages than of humour in the true sense, and occasionally the satire is a vigorous forecast of that to come. Already Dickens is making war upon the absurdities of public life, as well as of private. See the election of the beadle, in "Our Parish," with its specimens of vestry speech-making; or the address delivered before a ladies' society by a missionary from the West Indies, who "repeated a dialogue he had heard between two negroes, behind a hedge," and earned tumultuous applause by imitating the negroes in broken English. Still more noticeable is the "Parliamentary Sketch," in which he exhibits his profound contempt for the legislative assembly at Westminster. It contains an admirable portrait, that of the parliamentary butler, which (as might be said of one or two other things in the book) rather reminds one of Charles Lamb, and indeed would not be unworthy of him. Here and there crops up a prejudice against the "cultured" class, such as frequently betrays itself in the novels. Himself so informally educated, Dickens always looked askance at places of learning and the kind of men they produced. In his sketch of Scotland Yard, he flouts the antiquary, not all whose "black-letter lore, or his skill in book-collecting, nor all the dry studies of a long life" can avail to restore a true knowledge of things gone by. And, in describing some great domestic

occasion, he says that there was no doctor of civil law to deliver an address—"but there were several other old women present, who spoke quite as much to the purpose, and understood themselves equally well."

Let me, in conclusion, note an odd simile. Of a pleasure steamboat in a high wind it is said that "every timber began to creak, as if the boat were an over-laden clothes-basket." Who but Dickens would ever have hit upon a fancy so homely? It is significant of those experiences in early life which were the source of most of his weaknesses, yet supplied him with so much of his strength.

THE PICKWICK PAPERS

ON March 31st, 1836, was issued the first monthly number of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, edited by Boz.* The said Boz (aged four and twenty) had already put forth, in two volumes, a collection of *Sketches, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People;* his name was beginning to be recognized by readers in search of entertainment, and to excite the attention of prescient publishers. A newly established firm, Messrs. Chapman & Hall, had suggested to him that he should supply facetious letterpress to accompany a series of plates by the artist Seymour, their subject the adventures of a club of Cockney sportsmen; and the young author had accepted the suggestion in a modified form—he was to write as he chose, leading the artist instead of following him. Thus the Cockney Club became an association for the study of things in general, one alone of its members, Mr. Winkle, figuring as a comic sportsman. Between the first and second numbers, Seymour died; part the third was illustrated by a Mr. Buss; afterwards, the plates were supplied by Hablot K. Browne, a name to be long associated with that of the novelist.

Pickwick ran through twenty numbers. Of the first part, four hundred copies were prepared; of

the fifteenth more than forty thousand. Boz, not unnaturally, gave up the work of Parliamentary reporter, by which hitherto he had lived, and devoted himself to the career of letters.

Thus came into existence an English classic—a book representative of its age, exhibiting the life and the ideals of an important class of English folk, on the threshold of the Victorian era. Work so original of course excited prejudice in some quarters; we have the admission of Sydney Smith (a man not deficient in humour) that he "held out against" Boz as long as possible, even unto the days of *Nickleby,* and there must have been many who held out longer. Boz was by such persons deemed vulgar, an objection still heard in our own time from readers unable to distinguish between vulgarity of subject and of treatment. Let us remember that, in the years 1836-7, standard fiction was represented by Bulwer and Disraeli; the drawing-room talked of *Rienzi* and *Ernest Maltravers,* of *Henrietta Temple* and *Venetia.* But admirers grew to a multitude, and their enthusiasm was boundless. There is a classic story (told by Carlyle to Forster) of some sick person, who, after a visit from his clergyman, was heard to exclaim: "Well, thank God, *Pickwick* will be out in ten days!" Some years later, Lord Campbell declared that he would rather have written *Pickwick* than be Chief Justice of England. Now, after half-a-century, *Pickwick* holds its assured place in the literature of of our tongue, and, among all its author's works,

seems to have the best chance of achieving what is known as immortality.

The book was an improvisation. Sitting down to make fun for that small public which knew Goswell Street, and could relish the quips of a hackney-coachman, Dickens was led by his genius and by the indulgence of his jocose fancy into picturing all the popular life which his varied experience in and out of London had made familiar to him. He began heavily; the first page promises little; but before the end of Chapter I he had laughed out one of those happy phrases destined to become part of the common language; apologising for an offensive remark to the President of the Club, a member declares that he had considered that gentleman a humbug only "in a Pickwickian point of view." The second chapter sees the immortal Four set forth upon their travels, and the scheme of the book, in so far as it is to have any scheme at all, becomes evident. Dickens had in mind the old novel of the road, the story of adventure from inn to inn, as he knew it in his favourite authors of the bygone age, especially Smollett. Very appropriately, Mr. Pickwick and his companions make first for Rochester; was it not by Rochester Castle that the "very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of boy" (as Dickens long after described himself) had been wont to read and re-read, till he all but knew them by heart, those old masters of English fiction? But the high road is that of the nineteenth century; its possibilities of

romance are diminished; we are concerned with law-abiding citizens, who, spite of their bibulous propensities, persevere in a robust good humour, and never deviate from the commonplace. Characters are picked up, and dropped, as it suits the author's mood; he can be lavish with these samples of human nature, feeling his resources practically inexhaustible. The incident which develops into the main episode of the story attains its prominence merely because, as this merry thought flashed across his mind, the writer saw in it a great scope for amusing satire, for uproarious farce, and for the spirit of whimsical benevolence. Mrs. Bardell leads us to the Fleet, where at length we come upon a vein of graver interest, and see a new aspect of our author's genius; the picture of trivial and vulgar life acquires a larger significance, and the narrative is enriched by a serious import little imagined at its outset.

No essay in fiction ever gave more incontestable assurance of genius. Among the various endowments essential to a novelist of the first rank, the most important is that which at once declares itself to critical and uncritical reader alike; the power of creating persons. Force or charm of style, adroitness in story-telling, the gift of observation and of acumen, these are all subservient to that imaginative vigour which through language fashions a human being, and indues him with identity as unmistakable as that of our living acquaintances. Were it only by the figures of Sam and Tony Wel-

ler, Dickens would in this book have proved himself a born master in the art of fiction. Let this be ever kept in view when his standing in literature is debated. That his creations (here, at all events) are more or less ignoble, and represent an unlovely world, is nothing to the point; the same kind of power went to the shaping of Mr. Pickwick's manservant as to the bodying forth of Mercutio—power which, in its infinite manifestations, we indicate by the one word genius.

Sam Weller is, of course, the "hero" of the book, the character of prime interest; a significant fact in the history of literature. Dickens, without any deliberate purpose, obeyed the hint of an older day, and having his eyes on *Joseph Andrews,* on *Humphrey Clinker,* opened the new era of democracy in letters. London being the centre of his interests, the source whence he was to obtain his richest material from first to last, it is natural that he begins with a masterpiece of characterisation embodying the essentials of popular life in the capital city. "Mr. Weller's knowledge of London was extensive and peculiar"; he is the grown-up *gamin,* retaining his boyhood's impudence, shrewdness, vivacity, and adding to it the caustic philosophy resulting from much rough experience. Moreover, he is moralised; not only has life taught him that honesty is the best policy, but its hardships have served only to polish and brighten in him those sterling virtues which Dickens, as champion of the poor, will never cease to discover in humble hearts.

Sam is a model servant, capable, loyal, content with his station. He scorns humbug; it delights him to be "down upon it" in the person of Job Trotter or of Mr. Stiggins. Respecting himself and his duties, he looks with genial contempt on the fashionable "flunkey" and lashes him with dry sarcasm. He rises to any demand of circumstance and never shines more brilliantly than when confronted with the alarming formalities of a court of law; his wit proves more than a match for that of the sharpest and severest counsel. Sam is the incarnation of common-sense and common goodness, tricked out with all manner of personal and local singularities. In the flesh, we know, he never walked the streets of London; the man most nearly resembling him was deformed with no little coarseness, and made but an imperfect response to the appeals of humanity or honour. That we accept Sam Weller is the result of Dickens's power of creative illusion; that we regard him with affection is the work of Dickens's humour.

The great humourist is declared in two or three of the persons of *Pickwick,* and in many a passage throughout the book; where our laughter is immoderate, we pay tribute to the master of farce. In farce of every degree Dickens is without an equal. At times his humour mingles inseparably with this pranksome spirit; the immortal thirty-fourth chapter, "wholly devoted to a full and faithful report of the trial of Bardell against Pickwick," heads the farcical in English literature; but true

humour has a large part in its satiric effectiveness. Never, perhaps, was satire so large-hearted and so entertaining. At this time his genius had all the advantage of buoyant youth; after *Pickwick,* he hardly again exhibited this perfect spontaneity of side-shaking merriment. The later books present occasionally a satiric use of farce marred by extravagance which has a touch of the mechanical; in *Pickwick* he ridicules much more effectively by sheer exuberance of spirits. Nothing was ever penned so mirth-provoking in its admirable travesty of absurd truth as the address of Serjeant Buzfuz; no dialogue ever written impels more irresistibly to laughter than the examination of the witnesses. In its kind, this is work of the highest order. As we finish the chapter, as we hear old Weller address his son with the sorrowful reproof: "Oh, Sammy, Sammy, vy worn't there a alleybi!" we have a sense of something complete and abiding, even as at the close of a great scene in serious drama. Whatever the fun was to be got out of a sordid species of litigation has been extracted once for all, and only Dickens's genius could have made so much of it.

Vulgar he is not, even when his fancy sports with the vulgarest object. The sure test of vulgarity is that it debases whatever it takes note of. Dickens, on the other hand, cannot touch the commonest, coarsest detail of ignoble life, but at once it gains a certain interest and suggestiveness; it is seen from an unfamiliar point of view; and the mirth excited

in us, boisterous as it may be, invariably allies itself with the kindly emotions. It would be easy to quote from jesters of a later day examples of the arid facetiousness which serves only to degrade its topic; neither in *Pickwick,* nor in any other of its author's volumes, will you come upon any such perversion of the gracious spirit of laughter. A note of the vulgar in drolling is its affectation of superiority; in Dickens we always feel a sympathetic understanding, a recognition of the human through whatever grotesque disguise.

Think for a moment of Mr. Stiggins. The man, as we have elsewhere met him, or heard of him (he still exists), is undeniably odious. Dickens tells us, indeed, that the friend of Mrs. Tony Weller had a "semi-rattle-snake sort of eye—rather sharp, but decidedly bad"; and, as he sits over his hot pine-apple rum in the bar-parlour of the Marquis of Granby, a portrait-painter of the realistic school would present him as anything but a subject for tolerant chuckles. Dickens prefers to show us what vast comicality is inherent in the character and circumstances of this "deputy-shepherd." In truth, it is a philosophic attitude which goes with the genius of humour. Quite without pretence of philosophy, the young novelist, gaily writing his chapter for an expectant public, suggests a view of life saner and more faithful than any laboured scheme of scholasticism. "They're the wictims o' gammon, Samivel," says Tony Weller, speaking of the shepherd's female admirers; and it is as "wictims o'

gammon" that the laughing philosopher sees and sympathises with all mankind. For he knows that the imposter of one day is the dupe of the next, and that, however we may seem to be justified in condemnation, a smile at common failings is the safer as well as the happier form of judgment.

Mr. Pickwick himself is the only figure in the volume not at once completely realised. We first see him as a trivially vague conception, and insensibly he grows towards definiteness; as with the book itself, which had so casual a commencement, so with its eponymous hero, who, to begin with, is at best a puppet of farce, but develops into a very human personage. The subordinate members of the Club are at once adequately characterised, and long indeed would be a list of the incidental actors whose names recall forthwith a clear-stamped personality. Significant as any, with a regard to the author's future achievements, is Mr. Perker, whose vivacious acuteness and honesty rather remind one of Mr. Pleydell in *Guy Mannering.* Dickens's connection with the legal world was less personal than that of Scott, but he made more use of his experience; from the group concerned in the case of Bardell v. Pickwick, to Mr. Jaggers and his clerk in *Great Expectations,* this "valley of the shadow of the law" supplied him with much of the finest material for his frolic jesting and his serious art. We do not turn with any irresistible attraction to the so-called young ladies who supply the narrative with a feminine interest; they are chiefly interesting

as portraiture of a certain type of middle-class damsel early in our century. More pleasing, on the whole, is the pretty housemaid of Mr. Weller's affections. But, if proof be sought of Dickens's early ability to depict female characters, we must turn our backs alike on gentility and sentiment and be satisfied with the living likeness of Mrs. Bardell, of Mrs. Cluppins, Mrs. Tony Weller, and the choleric landlady of Lant Street.

Pickwick is a mental tonic. In its forthright flow of vivacity the book has no parallel. Dullness, weariness, seem unknown to the writer. Who can resist the influence of a convivial spirit such as greets us in these wayside inns and country houses? And it is all so English; whether in town or country, the life playing before us is peculiarly, vehemently, national. Dickens was never more himself than when describing a journey by coach on one of the great highroads; if it should happen to be at Christmas time, how his blood tingles with the joy of travel! Often as he returned to the subject, he did not surpass the classic journey of the Muggleton coach which bore Mr. Pickwick and his friends to Dingley Dell; the spirit of this narrative was not to be quite recaptured, and even as a piece of writing it is among the best that can be selected from his works. British to the core are all his people, representing the most stubbornly and aggressively conservative of social ranks. We breathe an atmosphere compounded of bracing air and the odours of punch.

Stout men of ripe middle-age behave like hilarious schoolboys. Cold and cloudy skies serve but to animate these magnificently energetic beings. "It was the sort of afternoon which might induce a couple of elderly gentlemen, in a lonely field, to take off their great-coats and play at leap-frog in pure lightness of heart and gaiety," and "had Mr. Tupman at that moment proffered 'a back,' Mr. Pickwick would have accepted his offer with the utmost avidity." Great is the insistence on good cheer. A barrel of oysters becomes a sacred object; a Christmas pudding radiates mirth and kindliness. As for the flowing bowl, to partake of it too well is a mere duty of all honest and hearty folk. We revel in the humours of inebriety; it would be interesting to count the number of occasions on which a Pickwickian, or someone connected with him, is jovially overcome. Their liquor, as a rule, being brandy, we are reminded very forcibly of a change in social habits which came about during Dickens's lifetime —one of the few improvements in his time to which he cannot be said to have directly contributed.

That *Pickwick* did in several directions help on the better day is beyond doubt. When writing his Preface to a popular edition of the book, ten years later, Dickens glanced at legal reforms which had meanwhile come about, and he noted with special satisfaction that the Fleet was no longer in existence. Recollections of his own sad childhood gave him a peculiar interest in the debtors' prison. The chapters of *Pickwick* concerned with the Fleet are

admirably picturesque; no oppressive gloom hangs over them, but in a few vivid strokes we have a sketch of the vile place such as can never be forgotten. It is indicative of his method and his power that Dickens shows us this haunt of horrors without one of those lurid or revolting details which it would have been so easy to insert, and of which a novelist in our day would make the very most. All the misery he desired to suggest is, nevertheless, made plain to us; we have abundant suggestion of character and the influence of circumstance; nor is there wanting a note of the truest pathos. These shadows serve as a background to the happier features of life which it was always Dickens's purpose to emphasise and glorify.

Except in the episodic stories—which denote a melodramatic tendency, and in one instance (the tale of Gabriel Grub) anticipate the Christmas Books—the style of *Pickwick* is colloquial. Sam Weller's racy tongue, with its trick of analogy, was thoroughly congenial to the author; just that unexpectedness, so apt, so droll, which gives point to Sam's remarks, is the characteristic of Dickens's happiest descriptions and comments. The evidence of his manuscripts shows that the early books were written easily and rapidly, in a bold hand, with very little correction; later, becoming more self-critical, he composed laboriously, with the result that one too often regrets the happy carelessness of his prime. His English is sound and idiomatic, frequently reminding one of his excellent models,

the eighteenth-century novelists and essayists. Nowadays it is refreshing to open these old-fashioned pages, so free from neologism and preciosity, and not uninstructive to observe that the old-fashion has still so much life in it.

It has been remarked that Mr. Pickwick and his serving-man bear a certain far-off resemblance to the Knight of La Mancha and his squire; and in one respect, at all events, the parallel is suggestive. Like Cervantes' great book, *Pickwick* appeals equally to childhood and to those of riper years. *Don Quixote* enthralls a boy's mind with mere joy in the picturesque, the adventurous; not till long after does he perceive the profound significance of that study in human nature. So, in the minor degree, with Dickens's work. To the young, its high spirits, its hilarity, its brisk movement and gay surprises, are an all-sufficient delight. Turn to the volume in middle age, and these things assuredly have not lost their charm; but the eyes bring a larger power of seeing, and to follow the old story from page to page is to marvel at the observation, the charity, the wisdom, which insensibly convert a book of jests into a cherished masterpiece of literature.

OLIVER TWIST

IT was a proof of Dickens's force and originality that, whilst still engaged upon *Pickwick,* with the laughter of a multitude flattering his joyous and eager temper, he chose for his new book such a subject as that of *Oliver Twist.* The profound seriousness of his genius, already suggesting itself in the course of Mr. Pickwick's adventures, was fully declared in "The Parish Boy's Progress." Doubts might well have been entertained as to the reception by the public of this squalid chronicle, this story of the workhouse, the thieves' den, and the condemned cell; as a matter of fact, voices were soon raised in protest, and many of *Pickwick's* admirers turned away in disgust. When the complete novel appeared, a *Quarterly* reviewer attacked it vigorously, declaring the picture injurious to public morals, and the author's satire upon public institutions mere splenetic extravagance. For all this Dickens was prepared. Consciously, deliberately, he had begun the great work of his life, and he had strength to carry with him the vast majority of English readers. His mistakes were those of a generous purpose. When criticism had said its say, the world did homage to a genial moralist, a keen satirist, and a leader in literature.

In January 1837 appeared the first number of a

magazine called *Bentley's Miscellany,* with Dickens for editor, and in its second number began *Oliver Twist,* which ran from month to month until March of 1839. Long before the conclusion of the story as a serial, it appeared (October 1838) in three volumes, illustrated by Cruikshank. Some of these illustrations were admirable, some very poor, and one was so bad that Dickens caused it to be removed before many copies of the book had been issued. Years after, Cruikshank seems to have hinted that his etchings were the origin of *Oliver Twist,* Dickens having previously seen them and founded his story upon them. The claim was baseless, and it is not worth while discussing how Cruikshank came to imagine such a thing.

There had fallen upon Dickens the first penalty of success; he was tempted to undertake more work than he could possibly do, and at the same time was worried by discontent with the pecuniary results of his hasty agreements. During the composition of *Oliver* he wrote the latter portion of *Pickwick* and the early chapters of *Nickleby;* moreover, he compiled an anonymous life of the clown Grimaldi, and did other things which can only be considered hack work. That he had not also to work at *Barnaby Rudge,* and thus be carrying on three novels at the same time, was only due to his resolve to repudiate an impossible engagement. Complications such as these were inevitable at the opening of the most brilliant literary career in the Victorian time.

How keenly Dickens felt the hardship of his position, toiling for the benefit of a publisher, is shown in Chapter XIV, where Oliver is summoned to Mr. Brownlow's study, and, gazing about him in wonder at the laden shelves, is asked by his benefactor whether he would like to be a writer of books. "Oliver considered a little while and at last said he should think it would be a much better thing to be a bookseller; upon which the old gentleman laughed heartily and declared he had said a very good thing."—"Don't be afraid," added Mr. Brownlow, "we won't make an author of you whilst there's an honest trade to be learnt, or brick-making to turn to." An amusing passage, in the light of Dickens's position only a year or two after it was written.

Oliver Twist had a twofold moral purpose: to exhibit the evil working of the Poor Law Act, and to give a faithful picture of the life of thieves in London. The motives hung well together, for in Dickens's view the pauper system was directly responsible for a great deal of crime. It must be remembered that, by the new Act of 1834, outdoor sustenance was as much as possible done away with, paupers being henceforth relieved only on condition of their entering a workhouse, while the workhouse life was made thoroughly uninviting, among other things by the separation of husbands and wives, and parents and children. Against this seemingly harsh treatment of a helpless class Dickens is very bitter; he regards such legislation as the

outcome of cold-blooded theory, evolved by well-to-do persons of the privileged caste, who neither perceive nor care about the result of their system in individual suffering. "I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected . . . There is only one thing I should like better, and that would be to see the philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish." (Chapter IV.) By "philosopher" Dickens meant a political-economist; he uses the word frequently in this book, and always in the spirit which moved Carlyle when speaking of "the dismal science." He is the thorough-going advocate of the poor, the uncompromising Radical. Speaking with irony of the vices nourished in Noah Claypole by vicious training, he bids us note "how impartially the same amiable qualities are developed in the finest lord and the dirtiest charity boy." This partisanship lay in his genius; it was one of the sources of his strength; its entire sincerity enabled him to carry out the great task set before him, that of sweetening in some measure the Augæan stable of English social life in the early half of our century.

That he was in error on the point immediately at issue mattered little. The horrible condition of the poor which so exasperated him resulted (in so far as it was due to any particular legislation) from the old Poor Law, which, by its system of granting

relief in aid of insufficient wages had gone far towards pauperising the whole of agricultural England. Not in a year or two could this evil be remedied. Dickens, seeing only the hardship of the inevitable reform, visited upon the authors of that reform indignation merited by the sluggishness and selfishness which had made it necessary. In good time the new Act justified itself; it helped to bring about increase of wages and to awaken self-respect, so far as self-respect is possible in the toilers perforce living from hand to mouth. But Dickens's quarrel with the "guardians of the poor" lay far too deep to be affected by such small changes; his demand was for justice and for mercy, in the largest sense, for a new spirit in social life. Now that his work is done, with that of Carlyle and Ruskin to aid its purpose, a later generation applauds him for throwing scorn upon mechanical "philosophy." Constitutional persons, such as Macaulay, might declare his views on social government beneath contempt; but those views have largely prevailed, and we see their influence ever extending. Readers of *Oliver Twist,* nowadays, do not concern themselves with the technical question; Oliver "asks for more," and has all our sympathies; be the law old or new, we are made to perceive that, more often than not, "the law is a ass," and its proceedings invalid in the court of conscience.

In a preface to *Oliver* (written in 1841) Dickens spoke at length of its second purpose, and defended himself against critics who had objected to

his dealing with the lives of pickpockets and burglars. His aim, he tells us, was to discredit a school of fiction then popular, which glorified the thief in the guise of a gallant highwayman; the real thief, he declared, he had nowhere found portrayed, save in Hogarth, and his own intention was to show the real creature, vile and miserable, "for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life." From the category of evil examples in fiction of the day, he excepts "Sir Edwards Bulwer's admirable and powerful novel of Paul Clifford," having for that author a singular weakness not easily explained. His own scenes lie in "the cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London," in "foul and frowsy dens," in "haunts of hunger and disease"; and "where"—he asks—"are the attractions of these things?"

This defence, no doubt, had in view (amongst other things) the censure upon *Oliver Twist* contained in Thackeray's story of *Catherine,* which was published in *Fraser's Magazine,* 1839-40, under the signature of "Ikey Solomons jun." Thackeray at this time was not the great novelist whom we know; seven years had still to elapse before the publication of *Vanity Fair.* His *Catherine* is a stinging satire upon the same popular fiction that Dickens had in view, but he throws a wider net, attacking with scornful vigour *Paul Clifford* and *Ernest Maltravers,* together with the Jack Sheppards and Dick Turpins and Duvals, and, in two instances, speaking

contemptuously of *Oliver* itself. "To tread in the footsteps of the immortal Fagin requires a genius of inordinate stride," and he cannot present his readers with any "white-washed saints," like poor "Biss Dadsy" in *Oliver Twist.* Still, says the author, he has taken pains to choose a subject "agreeably low, delightfully disgusting, and at the same time eminently pleasing and pathetic." His heroine is a real person, one Catherine Hayes, whose history can be read in the Newgate Calendar; she was brought up in the workhouses, apprenticed to the landlady of a village inn, and, in the year 1726, was burned at Tyburn for the murder of her husband. Thackeray uses his lash on all novelists who show themselves indulgent to evil-doers. "Let your rogues act like rogues, and your honest men like honest men; don't let us have any juggling and thimblerigging with virtue and vice." In short, he writes very angrily, having, it is plain, Dickens often in mind. Nor is it hard to see the cause of this feeling. Thackeray was impatient with the current pictures of rascaldom simply because he was aware of his own supreme power to depict the rascal world; what thoughts may we surmise in the creator of Barry Lyndon when he read the novels of Bulwer and of Ainsworth, or the new production of the author of *Pickwick?* Only three years more, and we find him writing a heartfelt eulogy of the *Christmas Carol,* praise which proves him thoroughly to have appreciated the best of Dickens.

But it must be avowed that very much of *Oliver* is far from Dickens's best, and Thackeray, with his native scorn of the untrue and the feeble, would often enough have his teeth set on edge as he perused those pages. *Catherine* itself, flung off in disdainful haste, is evidence of its author's peculiar power; it has dialogues, scenes, glimpses of character beyond the reach of any other English novelist. In certain directions Thackeray may be held the greatest "realist" who ever penned fiction. There is nothing to wonder at in his scoff at Fagin and Nancy; but we are glad of the speedy change to a friendlier point of view.

It was undoubtedly Dickens's conviction that, within limits imposed by decency, he had told the truth, and nothing but the truth, about his sordid and criminal characters. Imagine his preface to have been written fifty years later, and it would be all but appropriate to some representative of a daring school of "naturalism," asserting his right to deal with the most painful facts of life. "I will not abate one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of curl-paper in the girl's dishevelled hair." True, he feels obliged so to manipulate the speech of these persons that it shall not "offend the ear," but that seemed to him a matter of course. He appeals to the example of the eighteenth-century novelists, who were unembarrassed in their choice of subjects. He will stand or fall by his claim to have made a true picture. The little hero of the book is as real to him as Bill Sikes. "I wished to

show, in little Oliver, the principle of good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last." Think what we may of his perfectly sincere claim, the important thing, in our retrospect, is the spirit in which he made it. After a long interval during which English fiction was represented by the tawdry unreal or the high imaginative (I do not forget the homely side of Scott, but herein Scott stood alone), a new writer demands attention for stories of obscure lives, and tells his tale so attractively that high and low give ear. It is a step in social and political history; it declares the democratic tendency of the new age. Here is the significance of Dickens's early success, and we do not at all understand his place in English literature if we lose sight of this historic point of view.

By comparison with the book which preceded it, *Oliver Twist* seems immature. Putting aside the first chapter or two, *Pickwick* is an astonishingly ripe production, marvellous as the work of a man of five and twenty, who had previously published only a few haphazard sketches of contemporary life. *Oliver,* on the other hand, might well pass for a first effort. Attempting a continued story, the author shows at once his weakest side, the defect which he will never outgrow. There is no coherency in the structure of the thing; the plotting is utterly without ingenuity, the mysteries are so artificial as to be altogether uninteresting. Again, we must remember the time at which Dickens was writing. Our modern laws of fiction did not exist; a

story was a story, not to be judged by the standard of actual experience. Moreover, it had always to be borne in mind how greatly Dickens was under the influence of the stage, which at one time he had seriously studied with a view to becoming an actor; all through his books the theatrical tendency is manifest, not a little to their detriment. Obviously he saw a good deal of *Oliver Twist* as if from before the footlights, and even in the language of his characters the traditional note of melodrama is occasionally sounded. When, long years after, he horrified a public audience by his "reading" of the murder of Nancy, it was a singular realisation of hopes cherished in his early manhood. Not content with his fame as an author, he delighted in giving proof that he possessed in a high degree the actor's talent. In our own day the popularity of the stage is again exerting an influence on the methods of fiction; such intermingling of two very different arts must always be detrimental to both.

Put aside the two blemishes of the book—on the one hand, Monks with his insufferable (often ludicrous) rant, and his absurd machinations; on the other, the feeble idyllicism of the Maylie group —and there remains a very impressive picture of the wretched and the horrible. Oliver's childish miseries show well against a background of hopeless pauperdom; having regard to his origin, we grant the "gentle, attached, affectionate creature," who is so unlike a typical workhouse child, and are made to feel his sufferings among people who may

be called inhuman, but who in truth are human enough, the circumstances considered. Be it noted that, whereas even Mr. Bumble is at moments touched by natural sympathy, and Mr. Sowerberry would be not unkind if he had his way, the women of this world—Mrs. Corney, Mrs. Sowerberry, and the workhouse hags—are fiercely cruel; in them, as in many future instances, Dickens draws strictly from his observation, giving us the very truth in despite of sentiment. Passing from the shadow of the workhouse to that of criminal London, we submit to the effect which Dickens alone can produce; London as a place of squalid mystery and terror, of the grimly grotesque, of labyrinthine obscurity and lurid fascination, is Dickens's own; he taught people a certain way of regarding the huge city, and to this day how common it is to see London with Dickens's eyes. The vile streets, accurately described and named; the bare, filthy rooms inhabited by Fagin and Sikes and the rest of them; the hideous public house to which thieves resort are before us with a haunting reality. Innumerable scarcely noticed touches heighten the impression; we know, for instance, exactly what these people eat and drink, and can smell the dish of sheep's head, flanked with porter, which Nancy sets before her brutal companion. Fagin is as visible as Shylock; we hear the very voices of the Artful Dodger and of Charley Bates, whose characters are so admirably unlike in similarity; Nancy herself becomes credible by force of her surroundings and in

certain scenes (for instance, that of her hysterical fury in Chapter XVI) is life itself. The culminating horrors have a wild picturesqueness unlike anything achieved by other novelists; one never forgets Sikes's wanderings after the murder (with that scene in the inn with the pedlar), nor his death in Jacob's Island, nor Fagin in the condemned cell. These things could not be more vividly presented. The novelist's first duty is to make us see what he has seen himself, whether with the actual eye or with that of imagination, and no one ever did this more successfully than Dickens in his best moments.

His allusion (in the preface) to Hogarth suggests a comparison of these two great artists, each of whom did such noteworthy work in the same field. On the whole, one observes more of contrast than of likeness in the impressions they severally leave upon us; the men differed widely in their ways of regarding life and were subjected to very different influences. But the life of the English poor as seen by Dickens in his youth had undergone little outward change from that which was familiar to Hogarth, and it is *Oliver Twist* especially that reminds us of the other's stern moralities in black-and-white. Not improbably they influenced the young writer's treatment of his subject. He never again deals in such unsoftened horrors as those death-scenes in the workhouse, or draws a figure so peculiarly base as that of Noah Claypole; his humour at moments is grim, harsh, unlike the ordinary Dickens note, and sometimes seems resolved

to show human nature at its worst, as in the passage when Oliver runs after the coach, induced by promise of a halfpenny, only to be scoffed at when he falls back in weariness and pain (Chapter VIII). Dickens is, as a rule, on better terms with his rascals and villains; they generally furnish matter for a laugh; but half-a-dozen faces in *Oliver* have the very Hogarth stamp, the lines of bestial ugliness which disgust and repel.

One is often inclined to marvel that, with such a world to draw upon for his material, the world of the lower classes in the England of sixty years ago, he was able to tone his work with so genial a humanity. The features of that time, as they impress our imagination, are for the most part either ignoble or hideous, and a Hogarth in literature would seem a more natural outcome of such conditions than the author of *Pickwick* and the *Christmas Carol*. Dickens's service to civilization by the liberality of his thought cannot be too much insisted upon. The atmosphere of that age was a stifling Puritanism. "I have been very happy for some years," says Mrs. Maylie; "too happy, perhaps. It may be time that I should meet with some misfortune." (Chapter XXXIII). Against the state of mind declared in this amazing utterance, Dickens instinctively rebelled; he believed in happiness, in its moral effect, and in the right of all to have their share of it. Forced into contemplation of the gloomiest aspects of human existence, his buoyant spirit would not be held in darkness; as

his art progressed, it dealt more gently with oppressive themes. Take, for instance, the mortuary topic, which has so large a place in the life of the poor, and compare Mr. Sowerberry's business, squalid and ghastly, with that of Mr. Mould in *Chuzzlewit,* where humour prevails over the repulsive, and that again with the picture of Messrs. Omer and Joram in *Copperfield,* which touches mortality with the homeliest kindness. The circumstances, to be sure, are very different, but their choice indicates the movement of the author's mind. It was by virtue of his ever-hopeful outlook that Dickens became such a force for good.

Disposing of those of his characters who remain alive at the end, he assures us, as in a fairy tale, that the good people lived happily ever after, and we are quite ready to believe it. Among the evil-doers he distinguishes, Mr. Bumble falls to his appropriate doom; Noah Claypole disappears in the grime which is his native element—severity, in his case, unmitigated by the reflection that he too was a parish-boy and a creature of circumstances. Charley Bates it is impossible to condemn; his jollity is after Dickens's own heart, and, as there is always hope for the boy who can laugh, one feels it natural enough that he is last heard of as "the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire." But what of his companion, Mr. Dawkins, the Dodger? Voices pleaded for him; the author was besought to give him a chance; but of the Dodger we have no word. His last appearance is in Chapter XLIII,

perhaps the best in the book. We know how Dickens must have enjoyed the writing of that chapter; Mr. Dawkins before the Bench is a triumph of his most characteristic humour. What more is to be told of the Dodger after that?

We take philosophic leave of him, assured that he is "doing full justice to his bringing-up, and establishing for himself a glorious reputation."

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

IT was well for Dickens that, whatever his defects in the conception and in the practice of his art, he possessed in a high degree the artist's conscience. We English, proud of our thoroughness in many departments of life, have never felt that quality to be indispensable to the producer of fiction; probably because novel-writing has never been regarded as a road to wealth. The English novelist, especially when success has come to him, is wont to see his art from the reader's point of view; with results too obvious. Dickens, for all that he put his heart into everything he undertook, did not wholly escape this perilous influence; his early and rapid conquest of the public had results which at one moment threatened artistic disaster. In writing *Nicholas Nickleby* he was often overwearied, often compelled by haste to an improvisation which showed him at anything but his best. The book as a whole is unsatisfactory; considering the circumstances under which it was composed, the notable thing about it is the vigorous spontaneity of its better parts.

Long before *Pickwick* was finished, *Oliver Twist* had been begun, and through much of the year 1837 the author worked alternately at both books. He had engaged to complete another novel (*Barnaby Rudge*) in the course of 1838, and he was act-

ually tempted into undertaking to begin *Nicholas Nickleby* early in that same year. Dickens found himself confronted with the impossible. After a great deal of worry, and some little quarrelling, it was decided that *Barnaby* must be postponed; *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* proceeded together. The first part of *Nickleby* appeared on March 31, 1838, and twenty numbers, as usual, completed the story. It was illustrated by Hablot K. Browne.

"It will be our aim," wrote Dickens, a preliminary advertisement to his new novel, "to amuse, by producing a rapid succession of characters and incidents, and describing them as cheerfully and pleasantly as in us lies." Such, too, had been his aim in *Pickwick,* and probably he foresaw just as little of the course of the narrative in one case as in the other; he relied upon his abounding invention, and, at this time, had not arrived at the conception of a novel as a balanced and elaborated whole. His novel was the eighteenth-century story of adventure; in the Preface to the 1848 edition of *Nickleby* he glances significantly at the reading of his childhood, when he had "a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza"; but with the characteristics of that breezy fiction he combined a tendency traceable to his love of the stage, a melodramatic violence, already manifested in *Oliver Twist,* and never to be outgrown through all the changes of his mood and manner. So long as he is following the rambles of Nicholas,

not much troubling himself as to how they shall end, all goes well; but when the progress of his monthly parts reminded him that the story must be knit together to an effective close, he has recourse to theatrical devices, and we lose ourselves amid the tedious unreality of Madeline and Gride and Ralph. The latter part of *Nickleby,* in so far as it is concerned with these stagey figures, is perhaps Dickens's poorest work. Its picturesqueness —the quality which often redeems his melodrama —will not compare with that of the clock-and-lantern villainies in *Oliver Twist.* When we read of Ralph Nickleby "foaming at the mouth," we feel strangely remote from the delightful world of stage-coach and hostelry which our author has shown us with such inimitable spirit. No less drearily fantastic is the presentment of high-life debauchery in the persons of Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk. These persecutors of virgin innocence will bear no illumination but that of the footlights; they are, of course, stage-stricken shopboys masking as devil-may-care aristocrats. Let it be remembered, however, that Dickens was a very young man, with experience of life —however wide in one sense—necessarily very limited; also, that he was a "radical," with strong middle-class ideas. Even in these unprofitable portions of the story his writing is never insincere; whilst at work he thoroughly believed in his personages, even those which to us seem mere puppets. Some years after, speaking in public, he had occa-

sion to allude to Lord Frederick, and did so with laughing disparagement; but to suppose that he had any such thought whilst writing *Nickleby* would be a grave misunderstanding of the man and the artist. In the year 1838 he was producing too much and too quickly, but he never consciously sent forth inferior work saying to himself that "it would do."

In Dickens's correspondence with Forster, it is evident, from first to last, that, however desirous he might be of keeping his public in good humour, and of supplying them with moral examples, he always conceived himself to be a very close and faithful student of human character. The theories of so-called "realism" had, of course, never occurred to him; a novel, to his mind, was a very different thing from a severe chronicle of actual lives; for all that, the Preface to *Nickleby* closes with a remark which shows that he held himself a "realist" in portraiture. "If Nicholas be not always found to be blameless or agreeable, he is not always intended to appear so. He is a young man of an impetuous temper and of little or no experience; and I saw no reason why such a hero should be lifted out of nature." It was a protest, doubtless, against the school of fiction favoured by Mrs. Wititterly. We smile at the suggestion that Nicholas is an uncompromising study of human nature, but Dickens thought himself, and was thought, to have done a bold thing in taking for his hero this penniless youth of the everyday world. Had he not been even bolder in his

choice of theme for *Oliver Twist?* He was opening in truth a new era of English fiction, and the critic of our day who loses sight of this, who compares Dickens to his disadvantage with novelists of a later school, perpetrates the worst kind of injustice! Dickens is one of the great masters of fiction, who, by going straight to life, revitalized their art. That he did not see life with the eyes of a later generation can scarcely be brought as a charge against him; that his individuality affected his vision is no more than must be said of any artists that ever lived.

Nicholas himself, being the "hero" of the book, is (as in so many novels old and new) one of its least interesting characters. To feel the author's vigorous originality we must turn to the figures which are nowadays commonly spoken of as grotesques—to Squeers and Newman Noggs, to Mr. Crummles and Tim Linkinwater and Mr. Kenwigs. These, however grotesque, are living persons, and I think they live not merely by the imaginative power of the novelist; one and all of them Dickens may very well have met. To insist upon the "unreality" of such pictures is to evince slight acquaintance with the life of the lower middle class, or very imperfect observation. What may be reasonably objected to them is this: that Dickens does not show us the whole man, only certain of his more peculiar aspects. But whatever is given has been truly observed and faithfully rendered in the spirit of the artist. Nay, these figures could not be so

amusing, so delightful, but for their genuine humanity. Mr. Squeers, no doubt, had moments when he was not quite the Squeers we know; Mr. Mantalini was not at all times so vivacious, so choice in speech; but our author has shown us these persons on the side that took his fancy, and very wisely abstains from any effort to complete the portrait. Contrast them with Ralph Nickleby, in whose case Dickens goes out of his way to attempt what we nowadays call analysis; the reflections at the beginning of Chap. XLIV do not impress one and certainly help to make "unreal" a character very well presented earlier in the book. In this matter of deliberate analysis Dickens always failed; though much more elaborate, his discussions of Mr. Dombey are very little more to the point than this moralising paragraph on the secret mind of Nicholas's uncle.

With *Nickleby* Dickens began his lifelong warfare against the bad old methods of education. It is in Dotheboys Hall that the interest of this book really centres; to attack the "Yorkshire schools" was his one defined purpose when he sat down to write, and it seems probable that much more space would have been given to Dotheboys had not the subject proved rather refractory. Here, as always, in dealing with social abuses, Dickens had to reconcile painful material with his prime purpose of presenting life "as cheerfully and pleasantly as in him lay." How is one to show in a cheery and pleasant light the spectacle of a number of starved and tor-

tured children? It is done by insisting once and only once on the horror of the situation, and thence onwards keeping the reader mirthful over every detail that can be turned to merriment. One paragraph, admirably written (see Chap. VIII), puts before us the picture in all its hideousness; in the next we read, "And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile"; whereupon comes Mrs. Squeers, "presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle," and the porridge which "looked like diluted pincushions without covers," and the "first class in English spelling and philosophy." These Dotheboys chapters served their double aim; they led to a practical reform and delighted the young novelist's vast circle of readers. It is doubtful whether any writer ever succeeded so well, and so easily, as Dickens in this most difficult endeavour. *Nickleby* taught him his power as a social reformer, and it is not the least wonderful feature of his career that again and again he repeated this success, combining, with much felicity, the moral and the artistic purpose, generally incompatible.

One of Mr. Squeers's victims accompanies us through the book; but, precisely because this figure is meant to be consistently pathetic, it fails of its effect. Smike is a mere shadow, never either boy or man. On the stage the part has commonly been played by a woman; as also that of Jo, the crossing-sweeper; a significant fact. Smike and Jo reveal

the weakness of the master. Of true pathos there is abundance in his novels, but those passages are lightly touched; think of the Marchioness in *The Old Curiosity Shop,* and of the little maid called Charley in *Bleak House.* Sentimentality is a mark of the great semi-educated class from which Dickens sprung and to which, unconsciously, he so often addressed himself. In Smike he indulged a native proneness to the idly lachrymose; where he is truly pathetic, his genius overcame the fault of birth and breeding.

Nickleby is the first of Dickens's novels in which we meet with a full-length female portrait. Excellent sketches of a certain class of woman had appeared in *Pickwick* and in *Oliver Twist;* his third book fulfilled the promise of those earlier efforts, and, in Mrs. Nickleby, gave the world a masterly piece of characterisation. It is needless to repeat the tradition that Dickens found his model in a near relative; even without such opportunity of close study, he would have observed and have portrayed Mrs. Nickleby, who was a representative woman of the decent English household half-a-century ago, and who may still be met with more frequently than is desirable in the middle-class home. To be sure, the mother of Nicholas and Kate is delightfully idealised; what in reality bores, exasperates and crushes has been converted by a humorist into matter for inextinguishable laughter; but Mrs. Nickleby, in her turns of thought, her tricks of speech, is the great exemplar of her kind,

the perfectly silly and incompetent gentlewoman. For the joy of the thing, I copy one of her finest bits of monologue.

"Kate, my dear, I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce, and made gravy. . . . Roast pig; let me see. On the day five weeks after you were christened, we had a roast —no, that couldn't have been a pig either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve, and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs—they must have been partridges. Roast pig! I hardly think we ever could have had one, now I come to remember, for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops, and used to say that they always put him in mind of very little babies, only the pigs had much fairer complexions. . . . I recollect dining once at Mrs. Bevan's, in that broad street round the corner by the coachmaker's, where the tipsy man fell through the cellar-flap of an empty house nearly a week before quarter-day and wasn't found till the new tenant went in—and we had a roast pig there! It must be that, I think, that reminds me of it, especially as there was a little bird in the room that would keep on singing all the time of the dinner—at least, not a little bird, for it was a parrot, and he didn't sing exactly, for he talked and swore dreadfully; but I think it must be that. Indeed I am

sure it must. Shouldn't you say so, my dear?" (Chap. XLI.)

Kate makes answer "with a cheerful smile"; the necessity of Dickens's fiction kept out of sight the dreary and life-wasting aspect of this kind of thing, and in my comment it would be disproportionate to insist upon it. But one may remark that Mrs. Nickleby served the cause of social progress no less surely, if less obviously, than Squeers and Dotheboys. To Dickens we are vastly indebted—can there be a doubt of it?—for our advance in the matter of female education. That women of a certain class should be more or less fools was in his early day taken for granted; among the causes tending to a happier state of things, Dickens's humorous satire surely has had a great part.

Of Kate herself one can only say that she supplies a pendant to her brother; she has not been "lifted out of nature"; she has no relation to nature at all. No more has that pale martyr of the footlights, Madeline Bray. It is interesting to note that the young lady beloved by the hero of the novel, and whom in the end he marries, is so little realised by the author that she simply escapes one's memory; who, in thinking over *Nickleby,* gives so much as a glance at Madeline Bray? Dickens never succeeded in depicting an ordinary well-bred and charming girl—unless in his very last book. His most elaborate effort is Agnes in *David Copperfield,* and Agnes has hardly more life than Madeline. On the other hand, what could be better

than Fanny Squeers and Matilda Price? Fanny reminds us of Smollett, to whom Dickens owed so much; she is something too full-flavoured for a modern public, and, taken with certain other characters one could name, she suggests in a very interesting way the kind of work Dickens would have produced had he been born a century sooner.

Writing for that earlier generation, he would assuredly not have conceived the brothers Cheeryble, who embody a spirit peculiar to the age of flourishing "radicalism." When moved to answer critics who accused him of exaggeration in his characters, Dickens declared that the Cheerybles were drawn from life. We know what he meant by that, and we have no difficulty in distinguishing such a copy of nature from a portrait such as Mrs. Nickleby; in the Cheerybles all he took from reality was a habit of profuse benevolence, whereas in that other picture he has the very life-blood of his subject. Tim Linkinwater's employers are the good spirits of a fairy-tale; they anticipate the rapturous kindliness and joviality of the *Christmas Carol* and its successors. Of course they are plebeians; Dickens glories in their defects of breeding, and more than hints that such defect is essential to the true philanthropist. Henry Fielding, a writer not lacking in humanity, when he wished to depict "a human being replete with benevolence, meditating in what manner he might render himself most acceptable to his Creator, by doing most good to his creatures," gave the world Squire All-

worthy and saw no need of making him other than a gentleman. But Dickens was the spokesman of a class in rebellion against political privilege—that middle order which was enriching itself at the expense of the ranks below it, and aimed through political reform at social dignity. In him, a true philanthropy allied itself with this party spirit, and, whereas he was never in the political sense a democrat, the teaching of his work is often purely democratic. All the man's heart is put into this delightful bit of idealism; he glows over the Cheeryble view of life, and makes the reader glow with him. What our judgment must be of these merry pages if we take the modern view of the art of fiction need not be said. With severe art they have nothing whatever to do; but who will deny that they are literature?

In this unequal book (of all Dickens's the most unequal) one wholly admirable group of characters and incidents is that signalled by the name of Crummles. We approach it by a delightful way. "Nicholas, accompanied by Smike, sallies forth to seek his fortune"—how appetising is that old-fashioned chapter-heading! And how inspiriting the chapter itself—the wayfarer's tramp from London along the Portsmouth road. "A broad, fine, honest sun lighted up the green pastures and dimpled water with the semblance of summer, while it left the travellers all the invigorating freshness of that early time of the year." Then, the wayside inn, "twelve miles short of Portsmouth," the supper of

hot beef-steak pudding ordered by the gentleman in the parlour, and that gentleman Mr. Vincent Crummles "on tour." Here are all the jolliest traditions of the English novel, yet nothing is at second-hand, every scene and every figure is observed from the life of that day. Dickens must have been descended from a strolling player; he revelled in every sort of rambling entertainment, and saw the fun of this mostly squalid world as no man before or since. Everyone connected with the Crummles family is in his best vein, and possibly best of all is the house of Kenwigs. For an instance of Dickens's ripest humour, maturest work, thus early in his career, turn to Chap. XXXVI: "Private and Confidential; Relating to Family Matters." In plain terms it describes the confinement of Mrs. Kenwigs, from the domestic point of view, and nothing of its kind in English fiction is more masterly. Contrast these pages with those in which Ralph Nickleby is foaming and ranting, and you learn not only to appreciate the most delicate side of Dickens's genius, but therewith to estimate the misfortune which combined such a genius with such a bias to the histrionic.

As always, there is mingled with the writing worthy of being called humorous a good deal of sheer farce; sometimes of indifferent quality, as in the chapter relating to the Muffin and Crumpet Company, and the scene between Mr. Gregsbury and his constituents. Farcical, but in the best sense, is Mr. Mantalini, some of whose utterances

show amazing resources of comic inventiveness. No one, I fear, ever talked so marvellously—yet, who knows! for every day that I live I am more convinced of the difficulty of exaggerating human follies and singularities. However fantastic, the man is real enough to have excited the gaiety of multitudes, and some of his phrases are all but proverbial. Nothing of that sort can be said of the so-called lunatic who pays court to Mrs. Nickleby; he is not good farce, but mere tedious extravagance. Unfortunately, Dickens more than once tried to get fun out of insanity, with the same depressing results.

A word should be given to the episodic stories, which are part of the old-fashioned structure of the book. *The Baron of Grogzwig* is clever extravaganza; that which precedes it, the *Five Sisters of York,* illustrates Dickens's singular versatility, his power of appropriating a style utterly unlike his own. *Nickleby* is the last book in which he thus interrupted the course of the narrative.

MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

"I HAVE endeavoured, in the progress of this Tale"—thus wrote Dickens in his original Preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit*—"to resist the temptation of the current monthly number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design." The temptation of the current monthly number none the less disastrously prevailed. It could only be overcome in one way, by elaborating a scheme of the book in hand before sitting down to write it; and this was opposed to the method of Dickens's imagination. Oddly enough, his remark prefaced the one of all his novels in which this defect of artistic structure is most glaringly obvious; no great work of fiction is so ill put together as *Martin Chuzzlewit.* But for this imperfection, the book would perhaps rank as his finest. In it he displays the fulness of his presentative power, the ripeness of his humour, the richest flow of his satiric vivacity, and the culmination of his melodramatic vigour. Wrought into a shapely edifice of fiction, such qualities would have announced an incontestable masterpiece. As it is, we admire and enjoy with intervals of impatience. The novel is nought; the salient features of the book are priceless.

After *Barnaby Rudge,* Dickens took a year of well-earned and very needful holiday. He had

worked too hard; he had written too much. The difficulties with his publishers were at an end, and, with the opportunity of rest and change before him, he lent ear to pressing invitations from the other side of the Atlantic—January of 1842 saw him on the voyage which was to bear such important results. On his return he published *American Notes,* and then, with the uproar excited by this volume ringing in his ears, set himself to the new story which he had long had in mind. The first monthly number of *Chuzzlewit* appeared in January 1843; the last in July 1844; and the illustrations, as usual, were by Hablot K. Browne. Originally the book had a long cumbrous title, in a strain of facetiousness which now strikes us as unworthy of it and of the author; it is in keeping, however, with the first chapter, an utterly mistaken bit of sub-acid jocosity, which might well have been omitted from later editions, and certainly would never have been missed. (Contrast this, by the way, with the jesting fable which Thackeray prefixes to his *Newcomes;* it affords a lesson in literary method.) One cannot but feel that, after his long repose, the master's hand was "out." The true opening of the work is in Chapter II, where, in a scene which recalls the rural pages of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge,* Dickens finds himself again, and goes happily on his way.

For whatever reason (and who shall explain these caprices of the public?) *Chuzzlewit* in its monthly issue had but poor success. The sale, we

are told, never exceeded 23,000 copies, whereas of *Nickleby* a round 50,000 had been wont to go off. To Dickens, with his dependence upon public sympathy, this was annoying; an inconsiderate remark from his publishers, who felt uneasy as to financial results, heightened his annoyance to irritation; he cast about him for a means of improving the sale, with the result that Martin hurriedly decided to go to America. This meant, of course, a renewal of the pungent criticism which Americans had so strongly resented in his *Notes*. Dickens had in no small degree the English persistency and pugnacity. He made fun of America, first of all, because the opportunity afforded to his satiric and boisterous genius was irresistible; having felt his strength, he returned joyously to the onslaught, seeing no reason whatever why he should not look for profit to a sort of work that he delighted in, however offensive it might be to a foreign people. One must bear in mind his reasonable discontent on the international copyright question; assuredly, but for this crying injustice, the United States would have received gentler treatment at his hands. Dickens fought for what he regarded as simple honesty; all the better for him that he held a weapon which flashed so brilliantly and pierced so keenly. His defenders against American reproaches were wont to point out that no man had more severely censured and ridiculed the faults of his own countrymen. But of course there was a difference. He never offended a majority of his English readers;

he never fell foul of the English people at large; his writing palpitated with English emotion, sympathies, prejudices. The one point on which he really incurred some risk by indulging his satiric turn was where he touched religion; yet even here he had the Anglican Church on his side. To tell the truth, Dickens in America was Dickens the satirist without counterpoise of his native tenderness. Abstract the gracious sentiment from his work, and would he ever have attained half his popularity at home? This transatlantic episode is really important to an understanding of his genius and his success. As soon as he returned to purely English subjects, his favour in America revived; he became the novelist of the English-speaking world; and twenty-five years later, America welcomed his second visit with boundless enthusiasm. The copyright question was as far as ever from settlement, but Dickens had now mellowed to middle age. Moreover, he came with the express purpose of making money, and on this subject one must be content with remarking that Dickens combined most wonderfully the characteristics of true artist and man of business.

If Dickens was haphazard in regard to the construction of his stories, on the other hand he commonly began with a moral theme which served him for guidance. The present book had for its purpose "to show how selfishness propagates itself"; a leading illustration of the truth being, of course, the character and career of Jonas Chuzzlewit. But

there are probably few readers who rise from the book with reflections of this nature; the moral issue is not half so impressive as the power which sets before us a great number of immensely entertaining persons, our interest in whom holds no relation to their ethical value. In fact, the virtuous characters attract us least. We do not care overmuch for Tom Pinch who ought to have had enough common-sense to recognize flagrant hypocrisy and rascality; for the most part he is a mere walking virtue; we are never quite clear as to his age, and can form only a blurred conception of his person. His friend Westlock is nothing but goodness and a name. In Old Martin we have not the slightest belief; his schemes leave us unmoved, and his final outbreak of triumphant wrath is too manifestly mere stage business. Martin the younger, titular hero of the book, presents himself to us as a thoroughly commonplace young man, whose flabby egoism could never do very much harm, and it is with great difficulty that we congratulate him on his conversion to a more wholesome frame of mind. Of Mark Tapley, to be sure, the world had made a favourite; he is no distant cousin to Sam Weller, talks now and then very much in Sam's vein, and amuses us with his cheery stoicism; but Mark does not stand in the front rank of Dickens's creations. At the other extreme, downright villainy as represented by Jonas fails somehow to stir our moral sensibilities. Jonas is a very vulgar ruffian, so primitive a creature that his mode of thought and

action is scarcely ever in doubt. True, he figures in an elaborate and powerful scenic effect, but as a bit of character he has small merit. There remain the really vivid personages, whom we watch and hear for their own inimitable sake, indifferent to their bearing on the moral, and often barely conceiving their connection with the tangled narrative. Mr. Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp are masterpieces of genius in its happiest mood, and behind them come a troop of figures alive from the same hand—Bailey, Junior, Sweedlepipe, Mrs. Todgers, Mr. Mould, Moddle and Betsy Prig and the Pecksniff girls. All are denizens of a mean world and personally ignoble; it is shocking company; with not one of them, male or female, can we imagine ourselves delighting to converse did we meet them in the flesh; yet in the realm of imagination they are our familiars. Their sayings remain with us for our mirth; sayings neither wise nor witty, but so perfectly indicative of character, so entirely original on the speaker's lips, that we never lose the first impression of surprise and amusement. Moreover, this talk has its serious significance; it represents a whole society, a phase of civilization; here we have lower London at the middle of our century, uttering itself so as to be forever recognizable. Each speaker is at once individual and a type; manifestly akin, yet so various of feature, they reveal the multitude behind them, the obscure swarming of a vast city.

This is one explanation of Dickens's impressive-

ness. He suggests, as few writers are able to do, the complexity of modern life, with special references to its sordid aspects; consciously or not, we are made to feel what an old, old world it is that has brought forth these surprising forms of humanity. When he aims at depicting the simply good, the touchingly ingenuous, he is never so successful as with the amusingly base; and this has its cause in the nature of things, for the society with which he is concerned does not favour goodness and ingenuousness. The conditions of its life are hard, for the most part ignoble; there goes on a furious struggle for existence, and assuredly the self-forgetful do not win the fight. Mr. Pecksniff flourishing carries conviction; as a ragged mendicant, whining to Tom Pinch, he is not the same man, but a puppet set to illustrate the axiom that honesty is the best policy. Mrs. Gamp, most happily, gets off with a dignified reproof which, of course, had not the least effect upon her conduct. These protagonists of the book (though not of the story) stand for incalculable forces of social corruption; as in all great studies of human nature, the artist implies more than he is aware of. Given a social order which aims before everything at material comfort, yet professes obedience to spiritual law, and midway in its battling throng appears Mr. Pecksniff; lower down, where the atmosphere is thicker and fouler, one will perceive Mrs. Gamp. They are types of a multitude given over to crass materialism, yet bound by moral for-

mula; a people which is stupidly proud of the letter though the spirit has long ceased to have a meaning for it. In their several spheres, Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp represent respectability—the significant name of a significant status. They are the successful, and we see how they have managed to succeed. Here is the problem of modern society reduced to its simplest terms. Life disguises the repulsive truth, complicates it with all manner of virtues, affections, prettinesses. But a great writer presents us with two chosen specimens of humanity, and the secret is bare to all who have eyes for it.

We laugh so much, however, that we are little disposed to look below the appearances which entertain us. Idle to question whether the way of merriment is the right way; whether the picture thus shown corresponds to "reality"? To each reader Dickens brings what that reader seeks; the laughter of each has its own significance; to one he exhibits a boisterous extravaganza; to another, a philosophy of existence; yet both must needs laugh. To the thankless persons who charged him with exaggeration for the purpose of making mirth, he answered in his preface to the final edition of *Chuzzlewit*. "What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions is plain truth to another." And he asks himself "whether it is always the writer who colours highly, or whether it is now and then the reader whose eye for colour is a little dull?" Of course, the novelist was right; he has given us essential truth, choosing his own method for mak-

ing it plain. Reflect on the laws of fiction. Into a page the writer must concentrate what in nature is boundless; his business is not to report life in extenso, but to convey to another mind some impression which it has made upon his own. If he do this honestly and capably, then his work is "true." A novelist can give only one aspect of a thing, that which at the moment it presents to him; in Pecksniff and Sarah Gamp, who to another beholder might have been tedious, offensive, monstrous, he saw matter for infinite jest, and the proof that he saw truly lies in the eager acceptance of his picture by mankind at large. For all art is relative to the human mind; apart from that sanction, it would be meaningless. One cannot easily explain why a drunken hypocrite who urges us to be moral and to contemplate existence should minister to our delight; nor why a loathsome creature who, under guise of sick-nursing, ill-treats and robs her patients should be to us a joy for ever; we only know that by a certain art this effect can be produced, and that Dickens had the art in perfection.

It is one thing to describe with vividness a personage of fiction; it is another, and greatly more difficult, to put convincing words into the personage's mouth. Often as Dickens succeeded in adapting the idiom of the London vulgar to the expression of a strongly marked personality, one instance of his power in this respect shines with surpassing brilliance; unparalleled in his work, or in that of

any other author, is the language of Mrs. Gamp. To describe Mrs. Gamp as the incarnation of vulgarity would be true, but inadequate; representing vulgarity in its essence, she is also vulgar in a special mode, and, what is more, vulgar through the medium of a strong individuality. No painful observer of her class could, by mere literal faithfulness, have transferred to paper this thick, gurgling flux of talk; knowing the lingo, we recognise it upon her lips, but at the same time we know that we never before listened to Mrs. Gamp; fortune never led us into this odorous presence until we were introduced to her by Dickens. Sensual grossness, luring shrewdness, the callousness of base experience, could not conceivably find fitter utterance. Compare her speech with that of Betsy Prig, in many respects a woman of the same stamp, but altogether lacking in originality, of poorer spirit, of thinner blood; Betsy's talk is mere acrid commonplace, the meanness of everyday. Read the quarrel scene between these two, one of Dickens's great things, and contrast the crude personalities wherein Mrs. Prig gives voice to her acrimony with the figured phrase, the pointed anecdote, the inimitable *hapax legomena,* which go to express Mrs. Gamp's indignation. This amazing creature is, in her way, a humorist; she throws out, in panting parentheses, little sketches of the life familiar to her, which show the amused observer. "Which Mr. Harris who was dreadful timid went and stopped his ears in a empty dog-kennel, and never took his

hands away or come out once till he was showed the baby, w'en being took with fits, the doctor collared him and laid him on his back upon the airy stones, and she was told to ease her mind, his 'owls was organs." Read her conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Mould in their parlour; admire her vein of bantering facetiousness, and its effect upon the hearers. Nay, so superabundant is her facility in the way of discourse that she has been led to invent an imaginary friend, a supposed constant interlocutrix, whose remarks, faithfully reported, lend graceful variety to her self-praise and her compliments. Great in herself, Mrs. Gamp becomes greater still as the author of Mrs. Harris: "I says to Mrs. Harris only t'other day, the last Monday evening fortnight as ever dawned upon this Pilgrim's Projiss of a mortal wale—." Of a truth Dickens has here achieved the incredible, the material was beneath contempt; in no small degree even loathsome. In his hands it became a new delight, unique and imperishable.

Mr. Pecksniff's eloquence exhibits art of another kind. It is purely personal; it is not the language of a class, however representative the way of thinking; the architect is an educated man, with polished diction at his tongue's end. Here we enjoy the humorous originality which has discovered a new form of insincere and inflated speech. "I am forced to keep things on the square if I can, sir," pleads Mrs. Todgers, in her curt and homely phrase. "The profit is very small." Whereto responds Mr.

Pecksniff: "Oh, Calf, Calf, Oh, Baal, Baal! To barter away that precious jewel, self-esteem, and cringe to every mortal creature—for eighteen shillings a week!" The exquisite rightness of Pecksniff's speech is well perceived in comparing it with that of a personage who belongs to the same order, a scarcely less eloquent humbug, to wit, Mr. Chadband (in *Bleak House*). There is great similarity between the style of these two; their unction aims at very much the same effect; yet never for a moment could we mistake the authorship of a phrase quoted from either. This, with many like instances, disposes at once of the thoughtless charge against Dickens, that his best-known figures are mere exaggerations to the farcical point of a vice or a humour. On the contrary, he excels in subtle delineation of characteristics which demand great adroitness in the artist. Consider what a number of new types he gave to fiction, new, yet at once recognisable by his public. That an English novelist should grope towards the figure of Pecksniff is natural enough; Dickens alone could grasp and present it. This was the appointed end of his genius; by humorous interpretation it set forth in a new light, and endowed with striking personality faults and foibles which were so common as to pass unregarded.

I dwell in this Preface on the point of dialogue, for in *Chuzzlewit*, it seems to me, the dialogue is Dickens's best. Up to this point it had gained strength; hereafter, it was to betray more or less

decidedly the encroachment of mannerism. In *Dombey and Son* the decline is noticeable; we have long, long pages of iteration, especially where the speaker is a person whom Dickens realises by force of will, instead of by the prompting of genius. Even *David Copperfield,* with all its return of spontaneity, and its matchless episodes, suffers from a note of the mechanical in much of its talk. But of *Chuzzlewit* only an insignificant part falls below the author's inspiration; on the whole it breathes a vital energy wondrously sustained. Open the book at hazard, and one is almost sure to light upon dialogue of irresistible originality. If the leading actors are absent, then it is Bailey, Junior, who flashes his cockney wit, or Mr. Moddle who moons for our delectation, or Montague Tigg who utters himself at large, or some other of a score one could name who says things unfailingly fresh and personal. From this point of view the American chapters are admirable. Whether Dickens "exaggerated" the American note, or (as some contend) gave no more than a fair impression of Transatlantic speech in certain orders of society, I have no means of determining; the thing beyond doubt is that his Americans express themselves with a racy vigour which has a great air of verisimilitude. With astonishing skill this language is varied in the mouths of different characters; Jefferson Brick does not talk like Mr. Scadder, nor like Hannibal Challop, nor yet like Elijah Pogram; but all are of the same soil, and unmistakably

native. Remembering the brevity of Dickens's American experience, one marvels at the abundant material commanded by his vivifying fancy. He is in his glory among these exuberances of character and of speech which appeal so forcibly to his humour on the hilarious side; he lets himself go, feeling that he cannot go too far; the old country could never have given him such scope in fantastically self-assertive diction. "He is a true born child of this free hemisphere; verdant as the mountains of our country; bright and flowing as our mineral drinks; unspoiled by withering conventionalities as are our broad and boundless Perearers! Rough he may be. So are our Barrs. Wild he may be. So are our Buffaloos. But he is a child of nature, and a child of freedom, and his boastful answer to the Despot and the Tyrant is, that his bright home is in the Settin' Sun." The unsurpassable gusto betrayed in such passages as this must have won their author's pardon at once from every American who had in any degree the literary sense.

Every quality of Dickens is seen at its best in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He has no example of the domestic ideal (his constant preoccupation) more successful than Ruth Pinch. Ruth making a pudding, Ruth at the butcher's, Ruth tripping by the Temple Fountain, remains with us as the type of a certain feminine excellence, which we may or may not admire, but which Dickens—representative of an epoch—admired with all his heart. Contrasted with her are the two Pecksniff girls, who

for insight and careful workmanship perhaps take precedence of all Dickens's underbred young women; their portraits never fall into excess of colour; they are bits of admirable "realism"; an impression of scoundreldom was never better conveyed than in the group surrounding Montague Tigg, and of all Dickens's murders the most effective from every point of view is that wrought by the sullen, brutal Jonas. Above all, the master hand shows itself in glimpses of everyday vulgar life, which demand a finer power than episodes of horror; for instance, the burial of Anthony Chuzzlewit, of which no praise can exaggerate the truth, the proportion, the grim humour. (It should be put side by side with Mrs. Kenwigs's confinement in *Nickleby.*) Mr. Mould in the bosom of his family; Mrs. Todgers in difficulties about gravy, or agitated about a courtship; the old clerk Chuffey in the old, musty warehouse; Poll Sweedlepipe's tonsorial existence; the household ruled by Mrs. Lupin;—endless the enumeration. What a full book it is! We feel ourselves amid a vast multitude, the thronging life of that over-peopled world which Dickens never allows us to forget.

For the most part, the prose of *Chuzzlewit* is excellent, much riper than that of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and more varied than that of *Barnaby Rudge*. Putting aside the first Chapter (which is weak from every point of view), the story begins with a characteristic description of a windy autumn sunset; there is perfect adaptation of language—

always simple, with large intermixture of the homely—to the cheerily familiar yet thoroughly fresh and fanciful mode of thought. The wind, we are told,—"after its pranks in the village street, hurried away rejoicing, roaring over moor and meadow, hill and flat, until it got out to sea, where it met with other winds similarly disposed, and made a night of it." This is Dickens in full command of his resources; the image is no sooner born in his imagination than it clothes itself in the fitting phrase; no striving and straining to be *himself,* as is too often the case in later books. Perfect, too, are his descriptions of persons; if possible, more vivid than ever as regards external feature, and adding thereto a richer suggestiveness of things within. "In this domestic chamber Mr. Mould now sat, gazing, a placid man, upon his punch and home. If, for a moment at a time, he sought a wider prospect, whence he might return with freshened zest to these enjoyments, his moist glance wandered like a sunbeam through a rural screen of scarlet runners, trained on strings before the window; and he looked down, with an artist's eye, upon the graves." A passage such as this corresponds to the little mellow masterpieces of Flemish art; the man is caught at the right moment, amid the natural surroundings, in an atmosphere of unctuously suggestive tone. In local picturing one of Dickens's most successful efforts is the view of "Todgers's" and its vicinity, and I doubt whether any other novelist ever gave at once such a complete and

such a living idea of a place he wished to describe. Recalling many scenes in the books which followed, one hesitates to say that he never again pictured with such power; but the subject in this case was peculiarly his own, and he elaborates detail with a fond minuteness which only enhances the impressiveness of the general effect. To depict London was one of the ends for which Dickens was born. In the pages headed "Town and Todgers's" he achieved supremely that purpose of his being.

DOMBEY AND SON

"DEALINGS with the firm of Dombey & Son, Wholesale, Retail and for Exportations,"—thus was the book originally entitled—came out in the familiar monthly parts, with illustrations by Hablot K. Browne, from October 1846 to April 1848. Its success was immediate, and great beyond expectation. Since the close of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (commercially a disappointment) more than two years had elapsed, Dickens's only publication meanwhile having been the *Christmas Carol;* he had refreshed himself with a long sojourn in Italy (which, oddly to our ears, he speaks of in a letter as likely to heighten his prestige with the public) and turned once more to the composition of a long novel with that gusto which was an essential feature of his genius.

Dombey was begun at Lausanne, continued at Paris, completed in London and at English seaside places; whilst the early parts were being written, a Christmas story, *The Battle of Life,* was also in hand, and Dickens found it troublesome to manage both together. That he overcame the difficulty—that, soon after, we find him travelling about England as member of an amateur dramatic company—that he undertook all sorts of public engagements and often devoted himself to private festivity—*Dombey* going on the while, from month

to month—is matter enough for astonishment to those who know anything about artistic production. But such marvels become commonplaces in the life of Charles Dickens.

The moral theme of this book was Pride—pride of wealth, pride of place, personal arrogance. Dickens started with a clear conception of his central character and of the course of the story in so far as it depended upon that personage; he planned the action, the play of motive, with unusual definiteness, and adhered very closely in the working to this well-laid scheme; nevertheless, *Dombey and Son* is a novel which in its beginning promises more than its progress fulfils. Impossible to avoid the reflection that the death of Dombey's son and heir marks the end of a complete story, that we feel a gap between Chapter XVI and what comes after (the author speaks of feeling it himself, of his striving to "transfer the interest to Florence"), and that the narrative of the later part is ill-constructed, often wearisome, sometimes incredible. We miss Paul, we miss Walter Gay (shadowy young hero though he be); Florence is too colourless for deep interest, and the second Mrs. Dombey is rather forced upon us than accepted as a natural figure in the drama. Dickens's familiar shortcomings are abundantly exemplified. He is wholly incapable of devising a plausible intrigue, and shocks the reader with monstrous improbabilities such as all that portion of the dénouement in which old Mrs. Brown and her daughter are concerned.

A favourite device with him (often employed with picturesque effect) was to bring into contact persons representing widely severed social ranks; in this book the "effect" depends too often on "incidences of the boldest artificiality," as nearly always we end by neglecting the story as a story, and surrendering ourselves to the charm of certain parts, the fascination of certain characters.

It was unfortunate that Dickens planned his book to illustrate a passion—for the treatment of passion does not come within his scope. Compare his personages meant to be vehement with the like in Balzac; the difference is that between a drawing of Michael Angelo and one by Fuseli. Mr. Dombey himself is consistently presented, but we regard him as an actor rather than a human being. Still more decidedly is this the case with Carker, whose deeds proclaim him an automaton, and with Edith, who has her place beside several other would-be haughty women in the other novels. In this parallel of aristocratic Mrs. Skewton and her daughter with plebeian Mrs. Brown and *her* daughter we note a happy conception, but neither of the younger women is convincingly drawn, and as for Alice Marwood, she is perhaps the most stagey figure in all Dickens; Chapter XXXIV, a scene between Alice and her mother, I take to be the worst he ever wrote.

Thus, as a satire on Pride, the book is not very effective. Contrast the life of Mr. Dombey and his polite acquaintances with that which goes on

below-stairs in Mr. Dombey's house; in the one case we have conscientious labour, never quite successful in vitalising its subjects; in the other, the work of an artist with full command of his material. It is easy, and not much to the purpose, to disparage Dickens when he deals with the Dombey group by pointing to the masterpieces of Thackeray; these great writers differ widely in method and intention; each must be judged by the standard of achievement in his best work, and we need say no more than that Dickens is not seen at his happiest in certain parts of a novel which, for all that, remains a wonder and a delight. In one instance his reproofs and worldliness find adequate artistic expression; the death of Mrs. Skewton is an excellent piece of grisly realism. Throughout, indeed, the picture of this decayed woman of fashion is more striking than that of her low-life parallel, Mrs. Brown; and, after all objections, Mrs. Skewton's daughter comes much nearer to the likeness of a real woman than the fierce castaway, Alice Marwood.

The fact of the matter is that Dickens fails in certain of his upper-class portraitures not, first and foremost, because that class is unfamiliar to his imagination, but rather because he had chosen types of character which his art finds uncongenial. He can fail just as decidedly in a picture from the humble world, when misled by the unfortunate hankering after lofty or violent passion. Dickens had not the tragic gift; with the possible exception

of Sidney Carton, his novels present no figure which belongs in the true sense of the word to tragedy. What he can, and does often, excel in is the wildly or grimly picturesque—a totally different thing. Note how, in his efforts to give life to Mr. and Mrs. Dombey, where they are in fierce silent conflict, he falls into the rhetorical mood, and occasionally preaches at the reader for whole pages—a fault never so marked in his other novels. He is not given to "analysis"; it is his merit that he makes us see and know his people directly, rarely endeavouring to dissect their minds for us. But turn to the opening pages of Chapter XLVII, where one comes upon long paragraphs beginning with "Alas!" and "Oh!" and punctuated with notes of exclamation; it is Dickens woefully astray, so possessed with the need of emphasizing what he has to show us (and ought to be content merely to show us) that his writing-desk becomes a pulpit, and is soundly thumped. As an example of how he progressed in his art, think of that lofty personage in a later novel, Sir Leicester Dedlock; from every point of view better work than Mr. Dombey, and unspoilt by rhetorical excesses. Dickens was still engaged on refractory material, trying to attain what was beyond his limits; but we see clearly enough in Sir Leicester that it is character, not social position, which offers the stumbling-block.

It has become the fashion to sneer at Dickens's pathos, and the death of little Paul is commonly

mentioned as an example of intolerable mawkishness. That the story is at this point too long drawn out everyone must admit; it was one of the unhappy results of a method of publication for which no good word can be said; but to some readers, not wholly uncritical, the child's deathbed is still genuinely pathetic, though they cannot speak of it in the terms of excited eulogy which flattered the author's ears. Paul Dombey is a picture of childhood such as only Dickens could draw; abounding in observation, enriched with imaginative sympathy; a thing very touching and tender. Remember, too, that, in the forties, such a picture as this was a national benefaction; England sadly needed awakening to her responsibilities in the matter of childhood, and who shall say how great an influence for good was exercised by Charles Dickens in his constant preoccupation with children, their sufferings, their education, their claims of every kind. Poor little Paul is crushed by a system of ignorant selfishness. Impossible to depict more skilfully the sorrows of an exceptionally gifted child ground in the mill of what was understood to be instruction; the appeal to our compassion, our indignation, is irresistible. As in writing of "Little Nell," the writer somewhat lost control of himself; tears blurred his view of artistic proportion. So often has the effect been aimed at by subsequent novelists that it is grown a weariness, and is too often an obvious insincerity; we are apt to forget that Dickens imitated no one, that he

spoke from his heart at the prompting of his genius. The thing has perhaps been more artistically done; never with truer emotion or gentler touch.

A review of all the scholastic persons in Dickens's novels would be very interesting and of historical value. Grant the "exaggeration" which is inseparable from his methods (exaggeration in no vulgar sense, and far oftener an artistic merit than a defect), these masters and instructors represent very truly the state of middle class education in early-Victorian days. That the author of *Nicholas Nickleby* must be credited with a share in the abolition of many a Dotheboys' Hall has long been recognised, but his influence on public opinion as to the whole subject of teaching was probably much greater than is supposed. Dr. Blimber's establishment is a well-chosen example of the private school for young gentlemen which survives in the memories of gentlemen at present neither young nor old; it has no connection whatever with Dotheboys; externally, it promises very well indeed, and only when we see its educational system at work do we become aware that nothing is taught here, nothing learnt. The education presumed to be given is "classical." Dickens himself, whose boyhood knew little or nothing of Greek and Latin, had a strong prejudice against the "classics"; their true value he was not capable of appreciating, and his commonsense told him that, as used in the average middle-class school, they were worse than valueless—the cover for every kind of inefficiency. Miss Blimber,

a thoroughly conscientious person, was "dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages. None of your live languages for Miss Blimber. They must be dead—stone dead—and then Miss Blimber dug them up like a ghoul." Mr. Freder, rejoicing in the degree of B.A., was "a kind of human barrel organ, with a little list of tunes at which he was continually working, over and over again, without any variation." Contemporary readers made merry over the Blimber establishment; this was the veritable Dickens, greatest of sparkling jesters; but after merriment came reflection, and we may feel assured that many an English paterfamilias, who gave his opinion in favour of modern against ancient, and helped on the new spirit in matters educational was more or less consciously influenced by the reading of *Dombey and Son*. Great is the achievement of a public man who supplies his audience with the picture that abides, the catch word unforgettable, and Dickens many a time did so. It is the picture and the catch-word, not reason or rhetoric, that effect reform.

Passing to the lighter features of the book, we see Dickens at his best in a large group of whimsical characters—figures not satirical (or not primarily so), but depicted for mere love of quaint humanity. And let it be noted that not the least successful of these portraits is that of Cousin Feenix, an aristocrat. Cousin Feenix is weak at the knees, and anything but strong intellectually;

doubtless he implies a good-humoured joke at the expense of an "effete" order; but, as we come to know the man, we like and even respect him. Morally there is much to be said for Cousin Feenix; he has fine sensibilities; his talk is always entertaining, and often profitable. In the last chapter but one he plays a delightful part; indeed, his appearance and behaviour make this chapter one of the pleasantest of all. The absurd charge against Dickens that he cannot represent a "gentleman" is refuted by several instances, and certainly Cousin Feenix must be numbered amongst them.

Major Bagstock is, of course, not meant to be a gentleman; he makes very good fun, however, and serves richly as a foil to "our friend Dombey." Pungent is the irony in this juxtaposition of the overweening City merchant and the military vulgarian of social pretensions; as we watch them go arm in arm, we feel Mr. Dombey more living than on most occasions. Miss Fox and Mrs. Chick are well contrasted, a contrast which helps us to sympathise with the angular maiden lady. Better still are Mrs. Pipchin and Miss Nipper. Were Florence Dombey anything like so well depicted as her maid, the story, as a story, would greatly profit by it; but Florence is merely a good girl of gentle breeding, as difficult a subject as any novelist can undertake, and very rarely (one thinks first of Mrs. Gaskell) done with complete success; whereas Susan Nipper is a young person after Dickens's heart, in her habits of speech suggesting a shrill

feminine echo of Sam Weller, and morally a pattern of all virtues, all the proprieties. She does not belong to the gallery of shrewish women; we feel her capable of outgrowing her "snappish" tendencies, and of becoming an excellent wife (guardian, one might say) to the egregious Mr. Toots.

Toots himself is a figure of farce, and at moments we see just a little too much of him. To be sure, the farce is good, so is that in which Jack Bunsby plays his part; better was never written than the scene exhibiting the matrimonial triumph of Mrs. MacStinger. Dickens throws himself into drollery such as this with extraordinary enjoyment. Read the passage (Chap. LX) beginning "While the Reverend Melchisedech was offering up extemporary orisons," and when laughter allows you to examine it critically, admire the dramatic quality of that hurried dialogue between Jack and the Captain. Farce, but of the finest, not a word too much, and every word telling of hilarity. And if you would see how Dickens's broadest mirth can melt into kindliest feeling, read on to the end of the chapter, through the little scene between Mrs. Toots and Florence, with the epilogue spoken by Mrs. Toots's husband; this was the kind of thing that made Dickens as much loved as admired; I cannot class myself with those who nowadays smile at it aloof.

Captain Cuttle has a larger humanity than his roaring friend, he is the creation of humour. That the Captain suffered dire things at the hands of

Mrs. MacStinger is as credible as it is amusing, but he stood in no danger of Bunsby's fate; at times he can play his part in a situation purely farcical, but the man himself moves on a higher level. He is one of the most familiar to us among Dickens's characters, an instance of the novelist's supreme power, which (I like to repeat) proves itself in the bodying forth of a human personality henceforth accepted by the world. His sentences have become proverbs; the mention of his name brings before the mind's eye an image of flesh and blood—rude, tending to the grotesque, but altogether lovable. Captain Cuttle belongs to the world of Uncle Toby, with, to be sure, a subordinate position. Analyse him as you will, make the most of those extravagances which pedants of to-day cannot away with, and in the end you will still be face to face with something vital—explicable only as the product of genius.

Consider the Captain as he appears in Chapter XLIX, one of the most delightful in English fiction. Florence Dombey, fleeing from her desecrated home, has taken refuge in the queer old house with the sign of the Midshipmen, is living there under the guardianship of the tough and tender old seaman. With what infinite charm of fancy is this picture set before us! With what command of happy illusion are we reconciled to so many improbabilities! "A wandering princess and a good monster in a story-book might have sat by the fireside and talked as Captain Cuttle and

poor Florence talked." Precisely, our novel is become a sort of fairy-tale; and for all that, we suffer no shock, no canon of arts is outraged. Dickens's art is consistent with itself. And arts mean illusion, in different degrees, of various kinds.

"In simple innocence of the world's ways and the world's perplexities and dangers, they were nearly on a level." It is in this sacred simplicity that Dickens above all delights; this it is that makes him akin to Oliver Goldsmith and to the better part of Sterne. Florence and the Captain, as they sit together by the fireside, are enveloped in the atmosphere of homeliness, which, to our English thought, favours every form of moral good. Oddity and homeliness—these are the notes of Dickens at his best. For another instance of their combination, turn to the scene of Mr. Toodle in the bosom of his family in Chapter XXXVIII. Many such scenes of humble domesticity occur in Dickens, and once or twice it happens that his sympathy with the poor a little outweighs his judgment; but his Toodle household is safe from any such censure. One of its members, Rob the Grinder, is nothing more or less than a young scamp; probably born so, and with all his scampish propensities developed by a bringing up at the hands of the worst kind of "charity." Rob's backslidings and repentings, his periodical affection for the good mother who weeps over him, his proclivity to lying, his greediness and thievishness make, from one point of view, the most

truthful picture of London boyhood to be found in Dickens's pages. One thinks of crossing-sweeper Jo, and regrets that lost opportunity; but for the allurements of melodrama, Jo and Rob might have made such an admirable pair of young rascals, each after his kind.

The "realist" in fiction says to himself: Given such and such circumstances, what would be the probable issue? Dickens, on the other hand, was wont to ask: What would be the pleasant issue? Several times during the composition of this novel he consulted with Forster as to the feeling of his readers about some proposed incident or episode; not that he feared, in any ignoble sense, to offend his public, but because his view of Art involved compliance with ideals of ordinary simple folk. He held that view as a matter of course. Quite recently it has been put forth with prophetic fervour by Tolstoy, who cites Dickens among the few novelists whose work will bear this test. An instinctive sympathy with the moral (and therefore the artistic) prejudices of the everyday man guided Dickens throughout his career, teaching him when, and how far, he might strike at things he thought evil, yet never defeat his prime purpose of sending forth fiction acceptable to the multitude. Himself, in all but his genius, a representative Englishman of the middle-class, he was able to achieve this task with unfailing zeal and with entire sincerity.

The aim of fiction, as Dickens saw it, was to amuse, to elevate, and finally to calm. When his

evil-doers have been got rid of, he delights in apportioning quiet happiness to every character in the novel beloved by him and his readers. Forster tells a story about the close of *Dombey and Son,* which amusingly illustrates this desire to omit no sympathetic actor from the final benediction. "I suddenly remember," wrote Dickens to his friend, who was correcting the proofs for him, "that I have forgotten Diogenes. Will you put him in the last little chapter?" Diogenes was but a dog, yet Dickens could not bear to close the book without mention of him, and accordingly we read that when the white-haired Mr. Dombey and his wedded daughter, with her children, walk on the sea beach, "an old dog is generally in their company." A light touch to the completed picture, but thoroughly characteristic of the artist's spirit and method.

BARNABY RUDGE

BARNABY RUDGE gave its author more trouble than any other of his books. We first hear mention of the name in 1837, when, with *Pickwick* still unfinished, with *Oliver Twist* begun ("not even by a week," says Forster, "in advance of the printer with either"), he chose the subject and title of a third story, which he agreed to write within a very short time for Mr. Bentley. Dickens was at this time over-working himself, excited by extraordinary success; at five-and-twenty, in the spring of his genius, nothing seemed impossible to him, and he would probably have made every effort to fulfil his engagement, but for the fact that it had been shaped on unfair terms, the thought of which first worried and later exasperated him. By way of compromise, he presently undertook to finish *Barnaby* by November of 1838, and thereupon burdened himself anew with the compiling of a *Life of Grimaldi.* In this same year, 1837, falls the agreement with Messrs. Chapman & Hall to write a novel as successor to *Pickwick* (published by that firm), in consequence whereof *Nicholas Nickleby* was begun early in 1838 and finished towards the end of the following year. How, under these circumstances, could Mr. Bentley's novel get itself written? It must be remembered that, in addition to his original

work, Dickens was editing Bentley's *Miscellany* (in which *Oliver Twist* appeared). "The conduct of three different stories at the same time"—he wrote to his impatient publisher—"and the production of a large portion of each, every month, would have been beyond Scott himself." A quarrel ensued, and one marvels how the novelist at this time managed to do any work at all. It was at length arranged that *Barnaby* should wait until the completion of *Oliver*.

In spite of all this, probably no man in England was enjoying his life more keenly than Dickens. It does one good to read the chapters of Forster which present these early years, so full are they of joyous energy. Dickens's temperament secured him against the danger of "forgoing all custom of exercise"; he could not exist without a good deal of activity in the open air, and his fortunate circumstances allowed him to take it in pleasant ways. He rode a great deal, and his notes inviting Forster to join him at such times are often mere shouts of hilarity; never was grown man so uproariously boyish. He ran across to the Continent; he combated fits of dullness by speeding off to Broadstairs. His marriage seemed to give promise of happiness, and already he was able to keep a pair of ponies for his wife's use. There is nothing, it seems to me, more wonderful in the history of literature than Dickens's achievements from 1837 to 1841, when we consider his age, his previous experiences, and the sudden bursting upon him of an unexampled

popularity. There needed the rarest combination of genius and character to guide him through this perilous time. He did not escape unscathed; good as the early novels are, we know they might have been made better; we see many a trace of hurry, of fatigue. But Dickens had an extraordinary power of resisting the common effects of applause and flattery; the artist in him prevailed against his own weaknesses and the world's assault. Only after a lifetime of glory did his manly nature seem to have suffered some decline. Few men can have been so tested, with result, on the whole, so honourable.

In January, 1839, when, by the terms of his compromise, it behooved him to begin the writing of *Barnaby Rudge,* Dickens felt himself unequal to the task. He was profoundly discouraged by the terms of the agreement entered into with Mr. Bentley at a time when he did not know the value of his future work. He writes to Forster to announce his intention of liberating himself from the unjust bargain. "The immense profits which *Oliver* has realised to its publisher, and is still realising; the paltry, wretched, miserable sum it brought to me (not equal to what is every day paid for a novel that sells fifteen hundred copies at most) ; the recollection of this, and the consciousness that I have still the slavery and drudgery of another work on the same journeyman terms; the consciousness that my books are enriching everybody connected with them but myself, and that I, with such a popularity as I have acquired, am struggling in old toils,

and wasting my energies in the very height and freshness of my fame, and the best part of my life, to fill the pockets of others, while for those who are nearest and dearest to me I can realise little more than a genteel subsistence: all this puts me out of heart and spirits. . . . There—for six months—*Barnaby Rudge* stands over." From every point of view Dickens was right. We may be allowed to wince at the phrase "genteel subsistence," especially when we remember the social tyranny which it indicates—a tyranny strong for harm in the great writer's career; but his passionate plea is unanswerable by anyone who can distinguish between a product of the human intellect and a bale of merchandise. Mr. Bentley had acted simply as a man of business; we may grant his right of complaint; but those who deal in men's brains must be prepared for the unexpected in the current of their commerce. Duty to his readers, no less than to himself, obliged Dickens to rest.

He ceased to edit the *Miscellany*. In the course of 1840 the agreement concerning *Barnaby* was cancelled and Dickens purchased back from Mr. Bentley the copyright of *Oliver Twist,* so that he now had only Messrs. Chapman & Hall for publishers. *Nickleby,* meanwhile, had run its course, and nothing seemed to prevent free work on the new novel. But it moved very slowly, amid many interruptions by external circumstance, and, after all, another book was to be written and published before *Barnaby*. Dickens hankered after a new

periodical; he had made a suggestion to Chapman & Hall, which resulted in the establishment of *Master Humphrey's Clock,* and for these pages (before his final withdrawing from the agreement with Bentley) he wrote *The Old Curiosity Shop.* In January, 1841, *Barnaby* is at last resumed, as the new novel for the *Clock.* We learn from Dickens's letters how hard he worked upon this story, which, inasmuch as it dealt with bygone days, was an unfamiliar kind of writing to him. The period, to be sure, was near enough to his own time to spare him the necessity of picturing strange social conditions, but he must have read very carefully the history of the Gordon riots, and the book altogether demanded more thought than had been needful for its predecessors. The good results of this slow preparation are at once observable; *Barnaby Rudge* is Dickens's best constructed story; and, in one sense of the word, the best written. It has faults, of course; the connection between the "plot" and the public events which occupy a large part of the book is not so close as it might be; we feel something of disproportion, and, now and then, are in danger of forgetting the point from which we started. But, considering Dickens's habit in this matter, there is reason to be more than satisfied with a story which, at least, is quite coherent, never violently improbable, and fairly progressive to the close. In an address to his readers, published after the completion of *Barnaby,* the author complained that he had found the prac-

tice of writing in weekly parts "most anxious, perplexing, and difficult." He gave in full his objections to this mode of publication and announced that he would revert to the old monthly issue for his succeeding novel. The truth is that his objections apply to both methods alike; to print parts of a work of fiction concurrently with the writing can never be anything but unsatisfactory, and many of the shortcomings of Dickens's novels are directly due to this system. But in the present instance it is probable that the book profited by the necessity of anxious planning and of difficult compression. Testimony to the attractiveness of the intrigue is afforded by the well-known incident which led to a correspondence between Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe. Midway in the serial publication, Poe exercised his acumen in solving the mystery of the Chigwell murder, and forecasting the general course of events to the end of the narrative, with the result that the novelist was moved to inquire whether Mr. Poe had dealings with the Devil. Of course, Dickens's characteristics as a master of fiction have nothing whatever to do with the special form of ingenuity which constructs "plots"; it was his misfortune that he could never outgrow that primitive view of the novel, and that, by endeavouring to fit his original work into an old-fashioned frame, he merely encumbered himself, and showed at a disadvantage in comparison with writers far below him.

Turning his thoughts to a historical novel, Dickens could not but fall, in some degree, under

the influence of Scott. This is perceptible in the style of the book, which differs considerably from that of its predecessors; also in the scenes and dialogues where Dickens had least scope for his own habits of mind, as where Sir John Chester is to the front, or the Haredales, or Lord George and Gashford. In his treatment of the riotous crowd (which is very successful) he may well have had in mind "The Heart of Midlothian," and perhaps it is not straining comparison to suggest that points of Barnaby's guise and demeanour reflect a memory of Madge Wildfire. The prose of the book is good, yet, for the most part, not characteristic of its writer; it is unaffected and forcible, lending itself well to rapid narrative. Read, however, the first half of Chapter XVI, a sketch of London at the date of the story, and contrast its good, plain, unimaginative English with any page of Dickens at his best—here he is not moving freely; the sprightly fancies do not come to him as they are wont. The same may be said of Chapter LXXVII; yet that description of the dawning of the condemned rioters' last day is excellent work; it would be admirable as the work of anyone less than Dickens.

What one misses most of all, perhaps, in *Barnaby Rudge* is a note of high spirits. It is altogether a less vivacious book (Sim Tappertit notwithstanding) than the others of Dickens's early time. One need not seek an explanation in stress of work; the subject sufficiently accounts for a subdued tone. Dennis the Hangman does not pro-

voke hilarity, and after reading the case of Mary Jones (recited at length in the Preface to *Barnaby*), one's only wonder is that an author who wrote with that story in his mind could still preserve so much of his native humour. Judging by my own experience, there must be many a reader to whom the thought of that infamous horror brings gloom unutterable; after such an introduction, one is not ready for explosions of mirth. Religious bigotry, too, is a sufficiently grave subject. We know the merrily contemptuous manner in which Dickens is wont to deal with "religious" absurdities and insincerities: Stiggins and Chadband, and many another of that stamp, remain for our delight. In *Barnaby* he touches the same subject more seriously, and, when one thinks of it, with remarkable impartiality. He leans to neither side; his characters illustrate at once the virtues of honest faith, the evils of honest intolerance, and the vices of hypocrisy. Dickens was guided in such matters by a very liberal spirit and by sound commonsense; at no point of his intellectual life does he show to more advantage. It would be impossible to discover in this book a phrase or a word indicating undue vehemence of judgment. And in this connection it may be noted that several of the characters exhibit a genuine manliness, such as Dickens did not often succeed in depicting. Mr. Haredale's gravity is well expressed; young Chester commands respect; both are personages alien to the author's familiar world. Better still, because more thor-

oughly understood, are Joe Willet and Gabriel Varden. I am not sure that Joe does not stand alone among Dickens's creations as an example of the handsome, honest, manly young fellow in that rank of life; he is perfectly credible, and he wins upon us by no singularity, but by mere force of his human qualities. Such a character is by no means easily presented; it calls for much more skill in the handling than those examples of eccentric or simpleton goodness which occur so frequently in the other novels, and which sometimes quite fail of their effect. Joe Willet is convincing from first to last. Nothing could be more natural than his courtship of Dolly and his bearing under her coquettish ill-usage; we feel a sympathetic sinking of the heart as he takes leave of her to go to the wars. Varden, too, is as honest and manly, withal as soft-hearted, as one could desire; the best type of his class completely realised. He does not incite us to laughter; we regard him with a friendly smile, and listen with quiet pleasure to his genial, common-sense talk. With his exasperating wife he is all good-nature and patience, yet he never loses our respect, and we are not at all surprised when, at the right moment, he vigorously asserts himself. Here Dickens is working upon lines of ordinary experience; for the moment he sees life in simpler colours than of wont. The result is satisfactory from the artistic point of view. Other creations, more characteristic of the master, claim our preference; but we are in no danger of forgetting these studies in a softer tone.

Barnaby himself, the so-called idiot, interests us very little. For some reason not easy to discover (perhaps it was merely his love of the grotesque in humanity), Dickens had a leaning to mad people, whom he liked to make amusing. In each case the insanity is merely conventional (unless we except Miss Fliet, in *Bleak House,* who is crazy with good reason) and, of course, no attempt is made to suggest a serious study of mental disease. In taking a person of disordered mind for the hero of his novel Dickens can have had no motive except a desire for picturesqueness. Barnaby is the victim of his father's crime, but this moral point does not suffice to justify the choice of subject. At one moment Dickens purposed the introduction of another madman; it came into his mind to show the mob of rioters directed by a seemingly acute and vigorous leader, who in the end should prove to have escaped from Bedlam; fortunately, his better judgment overrode this idea. With regard to the widow's son, it is a misuse of language to call him an "idiot." Idiocy means an imperfection of mind which degrades and possibly brutalizes; but Barnaby's weak point is a morbid development of the imagination at the expense of the reasoning powers; he is simply insane, and subject to poetic hallucinations. Moreover, we find him aware of his own condition, and glorying in it. "Ha! ha! Why, how much better to be silly than as wise as you! You don't see shadowy people there, like those that live in sleep—not you. Nor eyes in the knotted panes

of glass, nor swift ghosts when it blows hard, nor do you hear voices in the air, nor see men stalking in the sky—not you! I lead a merrier life than you, with all your cleverness. You're the dull men, we're the bright ones. Ha, ha!" Whereupon Mr. Willet sagely remarks: "He wants imagination, that's what he wants. I've tried to instill it into him, many and many's the time, but he ain't made for it, that's the fact." We should enjoy this comment of mine host of the Maypole much more if Barnaby had been in his wits. Lunacy may be the subject of art, provided it appear as a catastrophe; we follow Ophelia or Lear with unabated interest when they walk in the dark places of the shattered mind, but that is because we have known them as responsible human beings. A born lunatic has no place as a leading character in a work of fiction—least of all, when we see that his characteristics are merely fanciful caprices of the author.

The Raven deserved a better companion. Dickens had as keen an eye for points of character in bird and beast as in human beings; who but he could have written that chapter of *The Uncommercial Traveller* entitled "Shy Neighbourhoods," which treats of the moral effect upon fowls of life in a London slum? "I know a low fellow, originally of a good family from Dorking, who takes his whole establishment of wives, in single file, in at the door of the Jug Department of a disorderly tavern near the Haymarket, manœuvres them among the company's legs, emerges with them at

the Bottle Entrance, and so passes his life; seldom, in the season, going to bed before two in the morning." Excellent as is the picture of Grip in the novel, the Preface contains something still better, Dickens's reminiscences of the two ravens he had himself possessed; but best of all is the long letter he wrote to Maclise (quoted by Forster) describing in detail the last hours of the bird from which Grip was studied. "Towards eleven o'clock he was so much worse that it was found necessary to muffle the stable knocker. At half-past, or thereabouts, he was heard talking to himself about the horse and Topping's family, and to add some incoherent expressions which are supposed to have been either a forboding of his approaching dissolution, or some wishes relative to the disposal of his little property, consisting chiefly of halfpence which he had buried in different parts of the garden. On the clock striking twelve, he appeared slightly agitated, but he soon recovered, walked twice or thrice along the coach-house, stopped to bark, staggered, exclaimed "Halloa, old girl!" (his favourite expression) and died." The whole letter is an instance of Dickens's profusion in literary productiveness; to amuse himself and his friends he poured forth pages of inimitable merriment, often no less worthy of being given to the world than what he wrote for publication.

Picturesque in a much truer sense than Barnaby are the two prominent figures in the No-Popery mob: Hugh and Dennis. Hugh, the neglected

bastard of Sir John Chester, child of an outcast who perished on the gallows, is a very strong piece of work. From the moment when he lazily appears in answer to Willet's summons, and at a bound seats himself upon the horse he is to lead to stable, this romantic ruffian has a genuine interest for us; he is well conceived, well depicted, and there is moving tragedy in his fate. Dennis, as vile a creature as can be found in fiction, lends happy relief to the other's fine traits of savagery. With the hangman we come near to Hogarth; indeed, the comparison between Hogarth and Dickens must rest (in so far as it is justified at all) upon the grimmer features of this story; with one or two exceptions (such as the figure of Noah Claypole), it is elsewhere a contrast, rather than a similarity, of which we are aware in considering the two artists. But in Dennis we have much of the Hogarthian spirit—an uncompromising emphasis of ugliness, a sternly sardonic humour. The subject admits of no twinkling facetiousness; we are shown the humorous side of horror, but it is horror still. "'Did you ever, Muster Gashford,' whispered Dennis, with a horrible kind of admiration, such as that with which a cannibal might regard his intimate friend, when hungry,—'did you ever,'—and here he drew still closer to his ear, and fenced his mouth with both his open hands—'see such a throat as his? Do but cast your eye upon it. There's a neck for stretching, Muster Gashford!" The joke is professional and has the due effect

upon us. Since his Fagin in the condemned cell, Dickens had much matured; greatly better work is the scene of the hangman waiting to be hanged; it could not easily be surpassed for hideous force and truth. To the horrible, in the proper sense of the word, Dickens never after this returned. His next book contained the murderer, Jonas Chuzzlewit, but that picture, very powerful of its kind, is in another tone; odd as the epithet may sound, it is *genial* work; we see everything through the true Dickens atmosphere, which softens the impression by those very means that serve to heighten it. Study the execution chapter of *Barnaby,* and note the absence of familiar touches, those side-glances at the reader which keep one in heart: all is straightforward reporting, vigorous, pitiless, no room for a superfluous word. Admirable work, but in darker mood than suits the author's genius.

It is a relief to turn to the Maypole. Given an old Inn amid country lanes, and Dickens is at his happiest. He delights in the picturesque exterior, in the comfort, the old-time habits, the scents and odours to be met on crossing the threshold. Pure joy to him, also, is the immeasurable stupidity and monumental self-esteem of such a landlord as old Willet. This engaging blockhead belongs to the school of Dogberry and Verges; he is almost worthy—nay, I think altogether worthy—of a place beside them. Such a portrait depends for its vitality upon observation which is humorously sympathetic. Anyone can insist upon Willet's ludi-

crous features and write him down an ass; the result is something forgotten as soon as seen. But Dickens gets to the very core of the man's absurd being; he loves him, as a collector loves a fine specimen; he chuckles in anticipation of the creature's next look or word. For perfect finish, for consistency and credibility, the portrait is insurpassable. It has significance, too, beyond the amusement at once excited; this fat somnolence, this engrained dullness, this stagnant habitude fermenting in foolish conceit, represents one natural outcome of an order of things bound by prescription, lulled by over-security. The day will come when meanings such as this, in which Dickens abounds, will be far more obvious and important than they seem to us now.

One need not say much of Dolly Varden, who stands for an example of feminine charm less attractive nowadays than to the early Victorians. We are led to suppose that the better of her parents has the larger part in her composition, and that as wife and mother she quite put aside the sweet defects of her girlhood. It may be so; on the other hand, one easily conceives of Mrs. Varden in her early years as a "charmer" very much like Dolly, and we know what Mrs. Varden became. Often as Dickens has drawn for us the insupportable matron, he never did so more faithfully and more impressively than in this instance. It pleases him to convert the wife of the cheery locksmith, lest we should take leave of Gabriel in too despondent a

mood; it is a case of compliance with the desire for a happy ending. Miggs, meanwhile, is treated unsparingly; for here there can be neither assuagement of acrid characteristics, nor solace in change of circumstance. Yet Miggs, all things considered, was less to blame than her mistress, and seemed a more hopeful subject for conversion. Decidedly an early Victorian figure, poor Miss Miggs. After half a century she is less obviously amusing; the jest strikes us as primitive. But she has her place with Miss Squeers and Sophy Wackles in Dickens's long gallery of notably unattractive women.

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

TO the popular mind, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is Dickens's most attractive book. In this story he arrived at a complete expression of his genius, made his full appeal to the sympathies of that intermediate class whose favour secures an author's reputation. A long list could be made of noteworthy contemporaries who followed the fortunes of Little Nell with passionate interest: Jeffrey was dissolved in tears; Macready pleaded for the child's life as for that of a loved relative; Thomas Hood gave his heart to the sad little heroine, and wrote tenderly about her before her history was complete; but it was among the multitude that this book found its enduring welcome, the mass of honest readers who admire they know not why and love for the same reason. Dickens the humorist had given abundant proof of his quality; as melodramatist he was known and appreciated; the exhibition of his power in pathos —pathos in the rich popular sense—established him for his lifetime, and who shall say how much longer, as England's chosen novelist.

Dickens's first conception of Little Nell was as the heroine of a short story to be published in his weekly magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock,* all the contents of which were from the editor's own hand. The idea on which Dickens founded this

periodical was not very happy, though sufficiently in his true vein to make it seem hopeful. He imagined a solitary old man living in an old house in an old suburb of London and cherishing above all things an old clock, which is associated with the recollections of his whole life. Presently, the recluse, known as Master Humphrey, makes friends with two or three other eccentrics, who meet in his house late at night for converse and story-telling, or rather reading, the members of this little circle being supposed to pen narratives which lie stored until wanted within the case of the old clock. Of course Dickens had in mind the eighteenth-century essayists, and their more or less ingenious methods of giving coherence to a literary miscellany; Master Humphrey was to deliver himself meditatively on all manner of subjects, and, "From his clock-side in the chimney-corner," do what, at a much later time, Dickens did so very much better in his *Uncommercial Traveller.* For this kind of thing the author was not yet ripe; or perhaps one should say that, among the *Sketches by Boz,* he had already given the best in the way of fanciful essay-writing of which he was as yet capable. The clock-case stories aim at being picturesque glimpses of old English life; however unwillingly, one must admit that they are commonplace; they remind us, however, that Dickens was at this time preparing for *Barnaby Rudge,* where he showed considerable imaginative power in dealing with the past. When it became evident that the *Clock* was failing to at-

tract readers, the scheme was extended by the introduction of certain old friends of the public, to wit: Mr. Pickwick and the two Wellers, with a youthful scion of the Weller house born to Sam since the world had lost sight of him. Tony and his son discourse in their familiar strain, and their talk is perhaps as good as ever, but the subordinate club which they are supposed to form had no life in it, could not serve the purposes of a magazine with declining circulation. The editor had miscalculated his resources in the way of casual writing and perforce abandoned his original design.

Master Humphrey's Clock was saved only by the beginning of a long serial which promised Dickens at his best, and which soon occupied, from week to week, the whole of the magazine. Thus, through many months of 1840 and '41, appeared *The Old Curiosity Shop,* wherein (accidentally as usual) the author expanded his original idea of a child placed amid grotesque surroundings and subjected to sad trials. Nothing he had yet written had taken such hold upon Dickens's mind and emotions. To-day, from our critical point of view, we find it difficult to take seriously the vehement phrases in which he wrote to friends about his suffering during the composition. The tragical end (suggested by Forster) cost him nothing less than anguish; he declares himself "nearly dead with work and grief for the loss of my child." He sat up till four in the morning to write the last pages—always an unusual mode of

work with him, and after this never repeated. It was an emotional age, and the men whose influence upon it was most perceptible wrought in a spirit of high enthusiasm. Carlyle, in these earlier days, thought but slightingly of *Boz,* yet his prophetic glow and wrath corresponded, on another plane, to the effusive tenderness wherewith Dickens answered the people's unconscious desire.

Jeffrey wept over Little Nell; his successors of to-day criticise the pages of deliberate pathos in which her death is narrated and find them intolerably mawkish. To be just we have to remember under what circumstances Dickens wrote. In 1840, Little Nell struck readers not only as pathetic, but as fresh and original, which indeed she was; overfamiliarity robs us of the delight which was inspired by a new vein of fiction, discovered and worked by a master spirit. It was Dickens who taught his countrymen the imaginative value of humble domestic life; and in *The Old Curiosity Shop* he succeeds to perfection in conveying his idea of domesticity. The strange figures grouped about that of the child serve to emphasise her gentle homeliness of spirit. From the beginning of the story, when she is seen making order and comfort in the gloomy old house, to the end of her wanderings in the cottage by the still churchyard, her one desire is for the peace and security of home. This sentiment appeals very strongly to the English mood, and no one before Dickens had given it such emphatic utterance. We find it in Goldsmith; it

has a great part in the charm of Gray's *Elegy;* Wordsworth had turned it to purpose in his own grave way; and Tennyson was striking the same note. Remember, too, that Dickens spoke with a new voice on behalf of children; at a time when children were commonly neglected, and often horribly ill-used, he found a way of calling attention to their unregarded lives. Oliver Twist had already played his part; Little Nell, like Oliver, straying among perils, moved a more tender interest. Imitators and successors have worn out the subject; it is not easy nowadays to reproduce with any impressiveness that sentiment of the hearth, still less to animate a picture of suffering childhood; but for his own generation Dickens was perfectly successful with these as with other themes since grown wearisome. He pursued, with clear vision, an artistic motive and obtained precisely the effect at which he aimed.

The sentiment of Little Nell is that of *The May Queen.* Towards the middle of our century poets, no less than inarticulate men, found pleasure in a pathos which now seems to us excessive. It was pursued to the utmost end of tearfulness; we see the May Queen reprieved from death that we may weep anew, and conventional piety lends all its aid to the emphasising of a most approved emotion. Tennyson, of course, redeems his subject by the exquisite quality of his verse; Dickens is justified by the profound sincerity of his feeling and by his true sense of the picturesque. One would like

to find a place, in literary criticism, for a pathos below the universal, a pathos which is relatively true; under such a head would fall these pictures of gentle and fading childhood. To dismiss with a scoff pages which came from the hearts of Tennyson and of Dickens is something worse than dullness. This pathos was true for them and for their day; it had nothing of affectation, nothing of conscious extravagance; and if the ends of art were imperfectly served, none the less did such work tend to civilisation.

With art which is undeniable, Dickens has set his little heroine amid a world so ancient that in great part it is mouldering. The shop of Nell's grandfather, where all manner of crazy and curious antiquities are heaped together in gloom and dust, symbolises that old order, social and political, which is at once dear to the novelist and the object of his destructive satire. In every chapter of this story we catch some delightful glimpse of things old and picturesque; the details of ruin are tenderly dwelt upon, as for example in the description of a church where the child rested: "Everything told of long use and quiet, slow decay; the very bellrope in the porch was frayed into a fringe, and hoary with old age" (Chap. XVII). From one point of view, it might be the work of an utterly conservative mind, ever looking backwards, lamenting every change, and dreading the new time that advanced; herein, as in almost everything, Dickens represented the English people, conservative at the root of their

progressive principles. The ideal set before us is a life of the simplest virtues, favoured by conditions of rustic peace. Great towns, the haunt of every disorder, contrast with secluded hamlets, where gentleness and piety possess the heart. The child heroine, ever trying to save her companion from his fatal vice by drawing him further and further away into rural solitudes, becomes the embodied spirit of the book; she is sacrificed to greed and knavery and toil, even as the ancient virtues of homely life perish under a rule of heartless commercialism.

This love of antiquity and stability, always manifest in Dickens, yet permits him the freest criticism of evils which result from undisturbed prescription. One outcome of a society wrapped in ancient peace was that dignified and powerful lady, Miss Monflathers, to whom were entrusted the minds of the growing generation, that they might be shaped and polished on the approved pattern (Chap. XXXI). Miss Monflathers is the comfortable person who clearly perceives the duty of her social inferiors and proclaims it with peculiar unction. She would have all impolite noses kept vigorously to the grindstone; in their release is peril to Church and State. "Don't you know," she asks of Nell, "that the harder you are at work the happier you are?" It is the axiom of a condescending aristocracy, Dickens's abhorrence. "You might have the proud consciousness of assisting to the extent of your infant powers the manufacturers of

your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two and ninepence to three shillings per week." Whilst the instructive lady thus delivers herself, one of her pupils, the unconsidered child of poor parents, chances to show a trifling kindness to Little Nell, and draws upon herself a severe rebuke. "Is it not a most remarkable thing, Miss Edwards, that you have an attachment to the lower classes which always draws you to their sides, . . . that all I say and do will not wean you from propensities which your original station in life have unhappily rendered habitual to you, you extremely vulgar-minded girl." The strictly logical reformer would refuse to see any beauty in an order of things which had this philosophy for one of its natural offshoots. Dickens, an Englishman and an artist, clings to the ancient with inherited tenacity, yet assails its abuses with the keenest gusto. One writer alone has surpassed him in the expression of this habit of mind, and that is Ruskin. Despite differences of character and culture, Dickens and Ruskin have the same sentiment towards modern life, and the noblest eloquence of the philosopher, when he turns fondly backward, or prophesies against the passing day, is a re-utterance in perfect phrase of the message delivered by the novelist.

The preceding books had suggested their author's pleasure in rural life; in *The Old Curiosity Shop* this theme is predominant. Here we have

more of the country than in any other of Dickens's novels. With hardly any effort at description, he sets us amid fields and lanes and cottages, and produces by the simplest means that atmosphere of rusticity which has such an unfailing charm for the English reader. Dickens never talks about "nature"; there is a vast difference between his love of the country and the same disposition as expressed by Wordsworth; he nowhere suggests a thought above the reach of the average man. This rural strain is found through all the healthy periods of English literature; it connects Dickens with Chaucer, who had just the same irreflective joy in escaping from town and roaming the green meadows. When the weary Nell has climbed the tower of the church, which is to be her final resting-place, she is enraptured with the scene around her. "The freshness of the fields and woods stretching away on every side and meeting the bright blue sky; the cattle grazing in the pasturage; the smoke that, coming from among the trees, seemed to rise upwards from the green earth." Nothing could be homelier, in thought or wording, but a light is shed upon the page, and the reader loses himself in a happy dream. To strike such a note amid the roar of triumphant mechanism was to deserve well of one's time. The sympathy it excited in the masses of his countrymen enhanced Dickens's popularity, and will always have a great part in keeping his work alive.

To throw into relief the ideal of peace and virtue,

a number of sordid figures play their villainous or eccentric pranks around the innocent child. For the most part, they are creatures bred of social slime; their home is the grimy centre of London; set amid country surroundings, they would seem to pollute the landscape. Mr. Quilp of Tower Hill and Mr. Brass of Bevis Marks belong to a complex social order; their squalid self-interest has overcome all scruples; their vile persons and habits represent the spirit of inhuman greed against which the author is throughout pointing his lesson. Mr. Swiveller, when first we know him, is on the way to become just such another; a cheery selfishness promises its natural development; but Dick's sense of humour and the favour of circumstance combine to arrest his progress. One used to hear lively discussions as to the possibility of such a creature as Quilp; most people nowadays regard him and his kin as mere sport of Dickens's imagination. For my own part, I am disposed to accept the sprightly Daniel as a scarcely exaggerated portrait; the holes and corners of our civilisation send forth many a monster whose peculiarities are quite incredible to the ordinary inobservant person. Dickens revels in such extravagances of human nature. His instinct for the picturesque enables him to group his grotesque against the background which will show them most effectively, and in all his work there is nothing more sordidly delightful than the picture of Quilp at home, nothing more squalidly grim than Quilp's death in the foggy

Thames. Sampson Brass finds easier acceptance; he and his sister are admirably finished characters, as works of art the best figures in the story. Remark Mr. Brass's habit of soliloquising on the virtues of Quilp in Quilp's presence, a notable touch of humour. Between him and Sally there is fine contrast in similarity; the sister's rascally courage when Sampson shows himself a grovelling poltroon is excellent truth. Their little slave, Dick Swiveller's Marchioness, must take place with Dickens's best bits of humorous tenderness; consider the skill with which he has vitalised this scrubby little person, of whom we catch only one or two brief glimpses, but who remains unforgettable. She is greatly more real to us than the heroine of the book. For Dickens's imagination always works most successfully upon uncouth material; his art is primarily concerned with the underbred. The uncouth and the underbred play so vast a part in human life that to neglect them is to falsify; but only the rarest genius can turn them to worthy use, exhibiting their manifold significance in the light of mirth or of compassion.

The Nubbles' household is meant to illustrate one of Dickens's leading principles, that the decent poor are the salt of the earth; in this case, virtue is found even among crowded alleys, with only the teachings of Little Bethel and the solace of Astley's to support its courage. There is no half-heartedness in his championship of the humble hero as represented by Kit. Having "nothing genteel or

polite about him," Kit, when unhappy, did not imitate "your finely-strung people," who "must have everybody else unhappy likewise," but "turned his thoughts to the vulgar expedient" of doing all the kindness in his power (Chap. XIV). Mrs. Nubbles and her children shine in ideal domesticity; they enjoy what poor wandering Nell desires in vain; evil-doers may disturb their peace for a season, but simple virtue is, of course, triumphant, and at the end we are rejoiced by the prospect of a second Nubbles household which shall propagate sterling qualities through the years to come. "If ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties which bind the wealthy and the proud to home may be forged on earth; but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of the truer metal and bear the stamp of Heaven" (Chap. XXXVIII). Led by these convictions—which were to exercise a vast influence on the thought of his time—Dickens went far; he attributes to his chosen examples of the poor and lowly much more than the virtues of the hearth. Kit, besides being a good-natured, straightforward lad, possesses a delicate sense of honour which can only be described as chivalrous. When his worthy master suggests to him that he might like to enter into better-paid service, Kit is stricken at the heart with a noble distress; he cannot bear to be so misjudged; respectfully, but very firmly, he asserts his claim to be treated as one of nature's gentlemen. The scene

moves us to a smile; we are reminded for the moment of good little stories for good little people; happily, there enters Mr. Chuckster, who is so very much of the world as we know it, that we cannot but half credit all we have just heard. So does Dickens, by force of his ceaseless variety, keep hold upon our sympathies when another would weary or repel. In the chapter that ensues, Kit goes to look for his mother at Little Bethel, and under the provocation of the "small gentleman (by trade a shoemaker, and by calling a divine)," becomes altogether human. Mrs. Nubbles, too (who, on being awakened during the sermon, exclaims, "Oh, Christopher, how have I been edified this night!"), wins upon us by this characteristic weakness, not at all inconsistent, we may be sure, with her maternal duties. After all, we are not preached at; our author is no Little Bethelite; we find it pleasant to reflect upon the moral purpose of one who is on such good terms with life.

Nowadays, we note with interest the limits of Dickens's "radicalism." In his advocacy of the poor, he never demands that they shall be raised above the status of poverty. Morally, he would change the world; socially, he is a thorough conservative. Kit was born to be a servant, and a servant let him remain. He shall find a mate worthy of him among his own kind, and their sons shall be Kits over again, their daughters good little Barbaras. Let the humbly-born discharge the duties appointed them by Providence. What

comes of immoderate ambition we see plainly in the case of Nell's grandfather, whose ruinous vice originated merely in a desire to provide the child with luxuries to which she had no claim. To be sure, we learn in the last chapter that Kit, "after serious remonstrance and advice," did quit Mr. Garland's service, and that "a good post" was procured for him by benevolent persons; omission of all detail allows us to feel sure that to the end of his life he still touched his hat, and that his "prosperity" was of the respectful kind. Remember, it was to the middle class that Dickens addressed himself, speaking as one of them. His English spirit knows nothing of egalitarianism. The more wonderful that he was equally free from the least taint of condescension. How whole-heartedly he enters into the joys of these social inferiors! As when Kit and his domestic circle spend an evening at Astley's; a chapter which no other novelist could have written. Here is no caricature; it is the mere truth seen by entirely sympathetic eyes and reported with the kindliest gaiety. Abstract the sympathy, substitute cold observation, and we should have a truth, perhaps, but wholly uninteresting. It is only by the vehicle of emotion that life can be translated into art; in Dickens at his best the emotion is strictly subordinate to artistic law, and points no narrower moral than that of human charity.

It remains to speak of a most delightful feature of the book—those passages which are concerned

with strolling showmen. All through his life Dickens had an appetite for this kind of entertainment; he probably knew more of such folk than anyone else outside their obscure profession; there seems to have been a strain of vagabondism in his blood. For the purposes of this story no feature could have been more suitable; it is time-honoured vagabondism to which we are introduced; it harmonises with the note of antiquity, and with the rustic scene. An admirable picturesqueness charms us at each new encounter. Think how indelible on one's mind is that evening scene in the churchyard, where Codlin and Short are found resting themselves and repairing their tattered *dramatis personæ*. One sees it as an actual memory of one's own wanderings; the sky warm with sunset, the old grey ivied church, the clergyman's horse browsing among the graves, and there, seated upon the turf, the two disreputable showmen, with Punch perched cross-legged upon a tombstone behind them—he "seemed to be pointing with the tip of his cap to a most flourishing epitaph, and to be chuckling over it with all his heart" (Chap. XVI). Then, the supper at the Jolly Sandboys, with that "deep ruddy blush upon the room," and a blend of savoury odours which make the mouth water; the dog that had lost a halfpenny, and for punishment has to grind the Old Hundredth on an organ whilst the other dogs sup; and the talk about superannuated giants, "usually kept in caravans to wait upon the dwarfs"—what an artist was he who pictured it

for ever! Since Dickens's time there has arisen a school of fiction which, with incredible labour, strives to set before us the reality of things, to impress by a scrupulous fidelity of presentment; the method has been in a few instances successful, but which of these novelists has excelled Dickens in his power of reproducing for us what he saw with his mind's eye, and making it part of our own experience of life? The author of *The Old Curiosity Shop* did it without an effort. Moreover, he did it in a spirit of abounding cheerfulness, rebuking, by anticipation, the gloom of some who came after him, in the person of his sententious showman, Codlin the pessimist.

For the prose in which this book is written, not much can be said. In places it declares the author still young at his craft; it is marked with immaturity, occasionally touches commonplace, and nowhere rises above honest pedestrian English. The seeming exception, the passages of emotion which are concerned with the fading and the death of Nell, depend for their effect upon the common error that prose is dignified by assuming the rhythm of verse. Dickens himself was quite aware of the tendency which irresistibly beset him to fall into iambics when his feelings were deeply engaged; somewhere in a letter to Forster he jestingly remarks upon the habit. For favourable contrast, turn to the page in which he describes the flight of Nell and her grandfather from London; as style, it is not remarkable, but at least it is fair prose

and vividly descriptive. These shortcomings, however, count little against the eloquence of Mr. Swiveller, the conversation of Sampson Brass, and the philosophic dialogue of Messrs. Codlin and Short. Dickens's style is an expression of his humour, and touches perfection only on the lips of his living characters.

BLEAK HOUSE

IT was whilst engaged upon *Bleak House* that Dickens, for the first time in his career, complained of feeling overwrought. He began the writing of this book in November 1851, just a year after the close of *David Copperfield,* and was busy at it until August 1853; the first of the usual twenty monthly parts appeared in March 1852, with illustrations by Hablot K. Browne. Doubtless the story cost him a great deal of trouble, for he had set himself a task alien to his genius—that of constructing a neatly elaborate "plot," a rounded mystery with manifold complications, to serve as the vehicle for his attack upon a monstrous abuse. His letters of the time show that he was not working with the old gusto; he felt his other literary tasks, going on concurrently, very burdensome, to say nothing of the strain imposed by amateur acting and ceaseless social engagements. Of course the method of monthly publication, with author but a little in advance of printer, was, notwithstanding Dickens's deliberate defence, as bad a one as novelist has ever contrived, and we, who owe to it so many of Dickens's blemishes, cannot condemn it too severely. Imagine him to have written how, when, and where he pleased, making his books short or long with regard only to their subject, and choosing his own time for putting forth the com-

plete story, how different would be the possession bequeathed to us!

In the serial issue *David Copperfield* had not had a great sale; *Bleak House* began at once with a larger, and presently rose to a circulation of nearly twice that attained by the earlier and better book. The wise man does not try very hard to explain such statistics, but it seems intelligible that the opening chapters of *Bleak House* should have excited that sort of curiosity which in the public at large means interest; there is a lawsuit involving a great fortune, and there is a mystery affecting aristocratic lives. Herein lay novelty; for the two preceding books, *Dombey* and *Copperfield,* had opened with childhood, and followed a regular biographic tenor. Dickens's first idea with regard to their successor was to call it *Tom-all-Alone's,* and to make Jo the centre of interest; obviously a project of no great promise and soon abandoned. I have somewhere read a suggestion, that in the changed character of his later works, where "plot" takes the place of biographic narrative, we are to note the influence of Dickens's friend Wilkie Collins; but in the year 1851 Wilkie Collins had published only his first, and uncharacteristic, work of fiction, *Antonina,* and it is more likely that, if influence there were of one novelist upon the other, *Bleak House* had its part in the shaping of Collins's successful work; Inspector Bucket, at all events, certainly gave a new type to the novelists of crime.

Dickens thought he was making an advance in art. He had been occasionally reproached for the old-fashioned, happy-go-lucky progress of his stories, and now set himself resolutely to amend the fault. The result was a fiction which his biographer considers very nearly perfect. "Look back from the last to the first page of the present novel, and not even in the highest examples of this kind of elaborate care will it be found that event leads more closely to event or that the separate incidents have been planned with a more studied consideration of the bearing they are severally to have on the general result. Nothing is introduced at random, everything tends to the catastrophe, the various lines of the plot converge and fit to its centre, and to this larger interest all the rest is irresistibly drawn" (Forster, Bk. VIII, Chap. I). Now, if we omit the objectionable word "plot," this is a description of faultless art in the constructing of a story; it will apply, in its degree, to every fine drama, scenic or narrative. But in the case before us its application is imperfect, owing to Dickens's failure to distinguish between art and artifice. In the fable of *Bleak House* there is much ingenuity, but an almost total disregard of probability; the fitting of incidents suggests a mechanical puzzle rather than the complications of human life; arbitrary coincidence takes the place of well-contrived motive, and at times the motive suggested is glaringly inadequate. Briefly, the plot is not a good plot; infinite labour was wasted in a mistaken

direction; and here, as in so many of Dickens's novels, we have to enjoy the book in spite of its framework.

To make matters worse, the scheme is not homogeneous; intermingled with this weft of elaborate pattern are patches of a totally different order of work, the chapters of autobiography supposed to be written by Esther Summerson. In *Copperfield,* the first-person narrative was a great success, for it was indeed Dickens himself who spoke throughout, with all his qualities of humour and observation, vigour and pathos, allowed free play; one understands that the memory of his delight in achieving that masterpiece tempted him to a repetition of the same method. The result was most unfortunate. Of Esther Summerson as a woman we are liable to form no conception whatever, and we utterly refuse to believe that any hand save one penned the chapters bearing her signature. An attempt is made to write "in character," but it is speedily abandoned, and I imagine it would be an easy thing, by the changing of a very few words on each page, to incorporate these Esther portions with the rest of the narrative. The object, presumably, of writing a book in this way is to obtain the effect of varied points of view regarding characters and events; but it is of necessity a mistake in art. With a skill much greater than that of Dickens, the device is employed in Daudet's "Le Nabab," where one still feels that the harmonious

construction of the novel is unwarrantably disturbed.

So much for technicalities. To come to the root of the matter, *Bleak House* is a brilliant, admirable, and most righteous satire upon the monstrous iniquity of "old Father Antic the Law," with incidental mockery of allied abuses which, now as then, hold too large a place in the life of the English people.

Needless nowadays to revive the controversies which the book excited; we know that the Court of Chancery disgraced a country pretending to civilisation; we know that, not long after the publication of *Bleak House,* it submitted to certain reforms; yet it is interesting to remember that legal luminaries scoffed at Dickens's indignation and declared his picture utterly unlike the truth. One of these critics (Lord Denman) published a long and severe arraignment of the author, disputing not only his facts, but his theories of human nature. This novel, asserted Lord Denman, contained all Dickens's old faults and a good many new ones. Especially bitter was his lordship on the subject of Mrs. Jellyby, whom he held to be a gross libel on the philanthropic caused of slave emancipation. Many readers, naturally, found subject of offence in Mr. Chadband. Indeed, *Bleak House* seems to have aroused emotions in England very much as *Martin Chuzzlewit* did in America, the important point being that in neither case did Dickens's satire ultimately injure him with his public; in the

end, the laugh was on his side, and with a laugh he triumphed. Not a little remarkable, when one comes to think of it, this immunity of the great writer. Humour, and humour alone, could have ensured it to him. It is all very well to talk of right prevailing, of the popular instinct for justice, and so on; these phrases mean very little. Dickens held his own because he amused. The noblest orator ever born, raising his voice in divine wrath against Chancery and all its vileness would not have touched the "great heart of the People" as did these pages which make gloriously ridiculous the whole legal world from his Lordship in his High Court down to Mr. Guppy on his high stool.

The satire is of very wide application; it involves that whole system of pompous precedent which in Dickens's day was responsible for so much cruelty and hypocrisy, for such waste of life in filth and gloom and wretchedness. With the glaring injustice of the Law, rotting society down to such places as Tom-all-Alone's, is associated the subtler evils of an aristocracy sunk to harmful impotence. With absurd precedent goes foolish pride, and self-righteousness, and every form of idle egoism; hence we have a group of admirable studies in selfish conceit—Harold Skimpole, Mr. Turveydrop, Mr. Chadband, Mrs. Jellyby. Impossible to vary the central theme more adroitly, more brilliantly. In *Bleak House* London is seen as a mere dependence of the Court of Chancery, a great gloomy city, webbed and meshed, as it were, by the spinnings of

a huge poisonous spider sitting in the region of Chancery Lane; its inhabitants are the blighted, stunted and prematurely old offspring of a town which knows not fresh air. Perfect, all this, for the purpose of the satirist. In this sense, at all events, *Bleak House* is an excellently constructed book.

There is no leading character. In Richard Carstone, about whom the story may be said to circle, Dickens tried to carry out a purpose he had once entertained with regard to Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son.* That of showing a good lad at the mercy of temptations and circumstances which little by little wreck his life; but Richard has very little life to lose, and we form only a shadowy conception of his amiably futile personality. Still less convincing is his betrothed, Ada, whose very name one finds it difficult to remember. Nothing harder, to be sure, than to make a living picture of one whose part in the story is passive, and in *Bleak House* passivity is the characteristic of all the foremost figures; their business is to submit to the irresistible. Yet two of these personages seem to me successful studies of a kind in which Dickens was not often successful; I cannot but think that both Sir Leicester Dedlock and John Jarndyce is, each in his way, an excellent piece of work, making exactly the impression at which the author aimed. Compare Jarndyce with Mr. Pickwick and with the brothers Cheeryble. It is to their world that he belongs, the world of eccentric benevolence;

he is the kind of man Dickens delighted to portray; but Mr. Jarndyce is far more recognisably a fellow-mortal than his gay predecessors; in truth, he may claim the style of gentleman, and perhaps may stand for the most soberly agreeable portrait of a gentleman to be found in all Dickens's novels. Sir Leicester, though he shows in the full light of satiric intention, being a figurehead on the crazy old ship of aristocratic privilege, is a human being akin to John Jarndyce; he speaks with undue solemnity, but behaves at all times as *noblesse oblige,* and, when sinking beneath his unmerited calamities, makes no little claim upon our sympathetic admiration. We have travelled far since the days of Sir Mulberry Hawk; the artist, meanwhile, had made friends in the privileged class of his countrymen, and had learnt what the circumstances of his early life did not allow him to perceive, that virtue and good manners are not confined to the middle and lower orders. He would not go so far as to make Sir Leicester intelligent; in spite of personal experience, Dickens never reconciled himself to the thought of "birth" in association with brains. His instinctive feeling comes out very strongly in that conversation between the Baronet and the Ironmaster which points to Dickens's remedy—the Radical remedy—for all the evils he is depicting.

That the Dedlock tragedy is the least impressive portion of the book results partly from Dickens's inability to represent any kind of woman save the

eccentric, the imbecile, and the shrew (there are at most one or two small exceptions), and partly from the melodramatic strain in him, which so often misled his genius. Educated readers of to-day see little difference between these chapters of *Bleak House* and the treatment of any like "mystery" in a penny novelette. There is no need to insist on these weaknesses of the master; we admit them as a matter of critical duty, and at the same time point out the characteristics, moral and intellectual, of Victorian England, which account for so many of Dickens's limitations. Had he not been restrained by an insensate prudishness from dealing honestly with Lady Dedlock's story, Lady Dedlock herself might have been far more human. Where the national conscience refuses to recognise certain phases of life, it is not wonderful that national authors should exhibit timidity and ineptitude whenever they glance in the forbidden direction. Instead of a picture, we get a cloudy veil suggestive of nameless horrors; it is the sort of exaggeration which necessarily results in feebleness.

Dickens was very fond of the effect produced by bringing into close contact representatives of social extremes; the typical instance is Lady Dedlock's relations with crossing-sweeper Jo. Contemporary readers saw in Jo a figure of supreme pathos; they wept over his deathbed, as by those of Paul Dombey and of Little Nell. An ecclesiastical dignitary could not find words of solemn praise adequate to

his emotion at the end of Chapter XLVII. "Uncultured nature is *there* indeed; the intimations of true heart feeling, the glimmerings of higher feeling, all are there; but everything still consistent and in harmony. To my mind nothing in the field of fiction is to be found in English literature surpassing the death of Jo!" That expressed the common judgment; but there were dissentients, especially Lord Denman, who after deploring the introduction of so much squalor—"the author's love of low life appears to grow on him"—went on to protest against Dickens's habit of discovering "delicacy of virtuous sentiment in the lowest depths of human degradation." We know that Lord Denman was here quite right; for, though virtue may exist in the ignorant and the poor and the debased, most assuredly the delicacies of virtue will not be found in them, and it is these delicacies on which Dickens so commonly insists. If one fact can be asserted of the lowest English it is that, supposing them to say or do a good thing, they will say or do it in the worst possible way. Does there, I wonder, exist in all literature, a scene less correspondent with any possibility of life than that description of Jo's last moments? Dickens believed in it—there is the odd thing. Not a line, not a word, is insincere. He had a twofold mission in life, and, from our standpoint, in an age which has outgrown so many conditions of fifty years ago, we can only mark with regret how the philanthropist in him so often overcame the artist.

His true pathos comes when he does not particularly try for it and is invariably an aspect of his humour. The two chief instances in this book are the picture of Coavinses' children after their father's death, and the figure of Guster, Mrs. Snagsby's slave-of-all-work. Nothing more touching, more natural, more simple, than that scene in Chapter XV where Esther and her companions find the little Coavinses locked up for safety in their cold garret, whilst the elder child, Charley, is away at washing to earn food for them all.

" 'God help you, Charley!' said my Guardian. 'You're not tall enough to reach the tub!'

" 'In pattens I am, Sir,' she answered quickly. 'I've got a high pair as belonged to mother.' "

That is worth many deathbeds of ideal crossing-sweepers. We see it is a possible and intelligible thing that Charley should be a good girl, and her goodness takes precisely the right form. She is healthy in mind and body; her little figure makes one of the points of contrast (others are Mr. Boythorn, and Caddy Jellyby, and Trooper George, and the Bagnet household) which emphasise the sordid evil all about her. Anything but healthy, on the other hand, is Mrs. Snagsby's Guster, the poor slavey whose fits and starved stupidities supply us with such strange matter for mirth. She belongs to the Marchioness group of characters, wherein Dickens's hand has a peculiar skill. "Guster, really aged three or four and twenty, but looking a round ten years older, goes cheap with this unac-

countable drawback of fits, and is so apprehensive of being returned on the hands of her patron saint" —the parish—"that except when she is found with her head in the pail, or the sink, or the copper, or the dinner, she is always at work. The law-stationer's establishment is, in Guster's eyes, a temple of plenty and splendour. She believes the little drawing-room up-stairs, always kept, as one may say, with its hair in papers and its pinafore on, to be the most elegant apartment in Christendom. . . . Guster has some recompense for her many privations." The wonderful thing about such work as this is Dickens's subdual of his indignation to the humorous note. It is when indignation gets the upper hand, and humour is lost sight of, that he falls into peril of unconsciously false sentiment.

Among the characters of this book there is not one belonging to the foremost groups of Dickens's creations, no one standing together with Mr. Micawber and Mr. Pecksniff; yet what novel by any other writer presents such a multitude of strongly-featured individuals, their names and their persons familiar to everyone who has but once read *Bleak House?* As I have already remarked, most of them illustrate the main theme of the story, exhibiting in various forms the vice of a fixed idea which sacrifices everything and everybody to its own selfish demands. The shrewdly ingenious Skimpole (I do not stop to comment on the old story of his outward resemblance to Leigh Hunt), the lordly Turveydrop, the devoted Mrs. Jellyby,

the unctuously eloquent Mr. Chadband, all are following in their own little way the example of the High Court of Chancery—victimising all about them on pretence of the most disinterested motives. The legal figures—always so admirable in Dickens—of course strike this keynote with peculiar emphasis; we are in no doubt as to the impulses ruling Mr. Kenge or Mr. Vholes, and their spirit is potent for evil down to the very dregs of society, in Grandfather Smallweed and in Mr. Krook. The victims themselves are a ragged regiment after Dickens's own heart; crazy Chancery suitors, Mr. Jellyby and his hapless offspring, fever-stricken dwellers in Chancery's slums, all shown with infinite picturesqueness—which indeed is the prime artistic quality of the book. For mirth extracted from sordid material, no example can surpass Mr. Guppy, who is chicane incarnate; his withdrawal from the tender suit to Miss Summerson, excellent farce, makes as good comment as ever was written upon the law-office frame of mind. That we have little if any frank gaiety is but natural and right; it would be out of keeping with the tone of a world overshadowed by the Law. To regret that Skimpole is not so engaging as Micawber, with other like contrasts, is merely to find fault with the aim which the novelist sets before him. Yet it is probable enough that the rather long-drawn dreariness of some parts of the book may be attributed to the overstrain from which at this time Dickens was avowedly suffering.

In his Preface he tells us that he had "purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things." But the word romantic does not seem to be very accurately applied. In using it, Dickens no doubt was thinking of the Dedlock mystery, the involvement of a crossing-sweeper in aristocratic tragedies, and so on; all which would be better called melodrama than romance. What he did achieve was to make the common and the unclean most forcibly picturesque. From the fog at the opening of the story to Lady Dedlock's miserable death at the end, we are held by a powerful picture of murky, swarming, rotting London, a marvellous rendering of the impression received by any imaginative person who in low spirits has had occasion to wander about London's streets. Nowhere is Dickens stronger in lurid effects; for a fine horror he never went beyond Chapter XXXII—where it would, of course, be wide of the mark to begin discussing the possibility of spontaneous combustion. Masterly descriptions abound; the Court in Chapter I, the regions of the Law during vacation in Chapter XIX, Mr. Vholes's office in Chapter XXXIX, are among the best. The inquest at the Sol's Arms shows all Dickens's peculiar power of giving typical value to the commonplace; scene and actors are unforgettable; the gruesome, the vile, and the ludicrous combine in unique effects, in the richest suggestiveness. And for the impressive in another kind—still shadowed by the evil genius of the book, but escaped from the city's stifling atmosphere—

what could be better than Chapter LVII, Esther's posting through the night with Inspector Bucket. This is very vigorous narrative. We, of course, forget that an amiable young lady is supposed to be penning it, and are reminded of those chapters of earlier books where Dickens revels in the joy of the road.

As a reminder that even in *Bleak House* the master did not altogether lose his wonted cheeriness by humble firesides, one may recall the Bagnet household, dwelling at a happy distance from Chancery Lane. Compare the dinner presided over by the Old Girl beside her shining hearth with that partaken of by Mr. Guppy, Mr. Jobling and Mr. Smallweed at their familiar chophouse. Each is perfect in its kind, and each a whole world in little.

DICKENS IN MEMORY *

IN one of those glimpses of my childhood which are clearest and most recurrent, I see lying on the table of a familiar room a thin book in a green-paper cover, which shows the title, *Our Mutual Friend.* What that title meant I could but vaguely conjecture; though I fingered the pages, I was too young to read them with understanding; but this thin, green book notably impressed me and awoke my finer curiosity. For I knew that it had been received with smiling welcome; eager talk about it fell upon my ears; and with it was associated a name which from the very beginning of things I had heard spoken respectfully, admiringly. Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson—these were to me as the names of household gods; I uttered them with reverence before two of the framed portraits upon our walls.

Another glimpse into that homely cloudland shows me a bound volume, rather heavy for small hands, which was called *Little Dorrit.* I saw it only as a picture book, and found most charm in the frontispiece. This represented a garret bedroom, with a lattice through which streamed the sunshine; thereamid stood a girl, her eyes fixed upon the prospect of city roofs. Often and long did I brood over

* *From* The Critic, *January,* 1902. *Courtesy of G. P. Putnam's Sons, Publishers.*

this picture, which touched my imagination in ways more intelligible to me now than then. To begin with, there was the shaft of sunlight, always, whether in nature or in art, powerful to set me dreaming. Then the view from the window—vague, suggestive of vastness; I was told that those were the roofs of London, and London, indefinitely remote, had begun to play the necromancer in my brain. Moreover, the poor bareness of that garret, and the wistful gazing of the lonely girl, held me entranced. It was but the stirring of a child's fancy, excited by the unfamiliar; yet many a time in the after years, when, seated in just such a garret, I saw the sunshine flood the table at which I wrote, the frontispiece of *Little Dorrit* has risen before me, and I have half believed that my childish emotion meant the unconscious foresight of things to come.

I believe that the first book—the first real, substantial book—I read through was *The Old Curiosity Shop*. At all events, it was the first volume of Dickens which I made my own. And I could not have lighted better in my choice. At ten years old, or so, one is not ready for *Pickwick*. I remember very well the day when I plunged into that sea of mirth; I can hear myself, half choked with laughter, clamoring for the attention of my elders whilst I read aloud this and that passage from the great Trial. But *The Old Curiosity Shop* makes strong appeal to a youthful imagination, and contains little that is beyond its scope. Dickens's senti-

ment, however it may distress the mature mind of our later day, is not unwholesome, and, at all events in this story, addresses itself naturally enough to feelings unsubdued by criticism. His quality of picturesqueness is here seen at its best, with little or nothing of that melodrama which makes the alloy of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*—to speak only of the early books. The opening scene, that dim-lighted storehouse of things old and grotesque, is the best approach to Dickens's world, where sights of every day are transfigured in the service of romance. The kindliness of the author's spirit, his overflowing sympathy with poor and humble folk, set one's mind to a sort of music which it is good to live with; and no writer of moralities ever showed triumphant virtue in so cheery a light as that which falls upon these honest people when rascality has got its deserts. Notably good, too, whether for young or old, is the atmosphere of rural peace breathed in so many pages of this book; I know that it helped to make conscious in me a love of English field and lane and village, one day to become a solacing passion. In *The Old Curiosity Shop,* town is set before you only for effect of contrast; the aspiration of the story is to the country road winding along under a pure sky. Others have pictured with a closer fidelity the scenes of English rustic life, but who succeeds better than Dickens in throwing a charm upon the wayside inn and the village church? Among his supreme merits is that of having presented in abid-

ing form one of the best of our national ideals—rural homeliness. By the way of happiest emotions, the child reader takes this ideal into mind and heart; and perhaps it is in great part because Dickens's books are still so much read, because one sees edition after edition scattered over town and country homes, that one cannot wholly despair of this new England which tries so hard to be unlike the old.

Time went by, and one day I stood before a picture newly hung in the children's room. It was a large wood-cut, published (I think) by *The Illustrated London News,* and called "The Empty Chair." Then for the first time I heard of Dickens's home and knew that he had lived at that same Gadshill of which Shakespeare spoke. Not without awe did I see the picture of the room which now was tenantless; I remember, too, a curiosity which led me to look closely at the writing-table and the objects upon it, at the comfortable, round-backed chair, at the book-shelves behind; I began to ask myself how books were written, and how the men lived who wrote them. It is my last glimpse of childhood. Six months later there was an empty chair in my own home, and the tenor of my life was broken.

When, seven years after this, I somehow found myself amid the streets of London, it was a minor matter to me, a point by the way, that I had to find the means of keeping myself alive; what I chiefly thought of was that now at length I could go hither or thither in London's immensity, seek-

ing for the places which had been made known to me by Dickens. Previous short visits had eased my mind about the sights that everyone must see; I now had leisure to wander among the byways, making real to my vision what hitherto had been but names and insubstantial shapes. A map of the town lay open on my table, and amid its close printed mazes I sought the familiar word; then off I set, no matter the distance, to see and delight myself. At times, when walking with other thoughts, I would come upon a discovery; the name at a street-corner would catch my eye and thrill me. Thus, one day in the City, I found myself at the entrance to Bevis Marks! I had just been making an application in reply to some advertisement —of course, fruitlessly; but what was that disappointment compared with the discovery of Bevis Marks! Here dwelt Mr. Brass, and Sally, and the Marchioness. Up and down the little street, this side and that, I went gazing and dreaming. No press of busy folk disturbed me; the place was quiet; it looked, no doubt, much the same as when Dickens knew it. I am not sure that I had any dinner that day, but, if not, I dare say I did not mind it very much.

London of twenty years ago differed a good deal from the London of to-day; it was still more unlike the town in which Dickens lived when writing his earlier books; but the localities which he made familiar to his readers were, on the whole, those which had undergone least change. If

Jacob's Island and Folly Ditch could no longer be seen, the river side showed many a spot sufficiently akin to them, and was everywhere suggestive of Dickens; I had but to lean, at night, over one of the City bridges, and the broad flood spoke to me in the very tones of the master. The City itself, Clerkenwell, Gray's-Inn Road, the Inns of Court—these places remained much as of old. To this day, they would bear for me something of that old association; but four and twenty years ago, when I had no London memories of my own, they were simply the scenes of Dickens's novels, with all remoter history enriching their effect on the great writer's page. The very atmosphere declared him; if I gasped in a fog, was it not Mr. Guppy's "London particular"?—if the wind pierced me under a black sky, did I not see Scrooge's clerk trotting off to his Christmas Eve in Somers Town? We bookish people have our consolations for the life we do not live. In time I came to see London with my own eyes, but how much better when I saw it with those of Dickens!

Forster's biography told me where to look for the novelist's homes and haunts. I sought out Furnival's Inn, where he wrote *Pickwick;* the little house near Guilford Street, to which he moved soon after his marriage; Devonshire Place, in Marylebone Road, where he lived and worked for many years. But Forster did me another and a greater service; from the purchase of his book dates a second period of my Dickens memories, different in

kind and in result from those which are concerned with the contents of the novels. At this time I had begun my attempts in the art of fiction; much of my day was spent in writing, and often enough it happened that such writing had to be done amid circumstances little favorable to play of the imagination, or intentness of the mind. Then it was that the *Life of Dickens* came to my help. When I was tired and discouraged and seemed to have lost interest in my work, I took down Forster and read at random, sure to come upon something which restored my spirits and renewed the zest which had failed me. Merely as the narrative of a wonderfully active, zealous, and successful life, this book scarce has its equal; almost any reader must find it exhilarating; but to me it yielded such special sustenance as, in those days, I could not have found elsewhere, and, lacking which, I should perhaps have failed by the way. I am not referring to Dickens's swift triumph, to his resounding fame and high prosperity; these things are cheery to read about, especially when shown in a light so human, with the accompaniment of such geniality and mirth. No; the pages which invigorated me were those where one sees Dickens at work, alone at his writing-table, absorbed in the task of the story-teller. Constantly he makes known to Forster how his story is getting on, speaks in detail of difficulties, rejoices over spells of happy labor; and what splendid sincerity in it all! If this work of his was not worth doing, why, nothing was. A trouble-

some letter has arrived by the morning's post and threatens to spoil the day; but he takes a few turns up and down the room, shakes off the worry, and sits down to write for hours and hours. He is at the seaside, his desk at a sunny bay window overlooking the shore, and there all the morning he writes with gusto, ever and again bursting into laughter at his own thoughts. A man of method, too, with no belief in the theory of casual inspiration; fine artist as he is, he goes to work regularly, punctually; one hears of breakfast advanced by a quarter of an hour, that the morning's session may be more fruitful.

Well, this it was that stirred me, not to imitate Dickens as a novelist, but to follow afar off his example as a worker. From this point of view the debt I owe to him is incalculable. Among the best of my memories are those moments under a lowering sky when I sought light in the pages of his biographer, and rarely sought in vain.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE GISSING

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE GISSING

WORKERS IN THE DAWN. A Novel. In Three Volumes. By George R. Gissing. London: Remington and Co., 5 Arundel Street, Strand, W.C. 1880.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. vi + 384; Vol. ii, pp. vi + 404; Vol. iii, pp. vi + 444. Bound in light brown cloth with black end-papers. Edges cut.

THE UNCLASSED. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "Workers in the Dawn." In Three Volumes. London: Chapman and Hall, Limited. 1884.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 300; Vol. ii, pp. vi + 316; Vol. iii, pp. vi + 304. Bound in blue cloth with cream end-papers. Top edge uncut.

ISABEL CLARENDON. By George Gissing. In Two Volumes. London: Chapman and Hall, Limited. 1886.

2 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. iv + 294; Vol. ii, pp. iv + 328. Bound in green cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut.

DEMOS. A Story of English Socialism. In Three Volumes. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place, 1886.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. iv + 316; Vol. ii, pp. iv + 296; Vol. iii, pp. iv + 296. Bound in brown cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut. Issued anonymously.

THYRZA. A Tale. By George Gissing. Author of "Demos," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place. 1887.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 292; Vol. ii, pp. viii + 316; Vol. iii, pp. viii + 300. Bound in dark red cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut.

A LIFE'S MORNING. By George Gissing. Author of "Demos," "Thyrza," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place. 1888.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 316; Vol. ii, pp. viii + 304; Vol. iii, pp. viii + 336. Bound in light blue cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut.

THE NETHER WORLD. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "Demos," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place. 1889.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 292; Vol. ii, pp. vi + 306; Vol. iii, pp. vi + 310. Bound in light green cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut.

THE EMANCIPATED. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "The Nether World," "Thyrza," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Richard Bentley and Son, Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen. 1890.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. iv + 308; Vol. ii, pp. iv + 308; Vol. iii, pp. iv + 308. Bound in ornamented boards with cloth back and ornamented end-papers. Edges cut.

NEW GRUB STREET. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "The Nether World," "Desmos," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place. 1891.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 308; Vol. ii, pp. viii + 316; Vol. iii, pp. viii + 316. Bound in dark green cloth with yellow end-papers. Uncut.

DENZIL QUARRIER. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "New Grub Street," "The Nether World," "Thyrza," etc. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 169 New Bond Street, W. 1892.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: pp. iv + 342. Bound in green cloth with gray end-papers. Uncut.

BORN IN EXILE. A Novel. By George Gissing. Author of "New Grub Street," "Denzil Quarrier," etc. In Three Volumes. London and Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black. 1892.

3 Vols. Sq. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. 288. Vol. ii, pp. 272; Vol. iii, pp. 272. Bound in gray cloth with black end-papers. Uncut.

THE ODD WOMEN. By George Gissing. Author of "New Grub Street," "Demos," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, W. C. 1893.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. viii + 298; Vol. ii, pp. viii + 332; Vol. iii, pp. viii + 328. Bound in blue cloth with flowered end-papers. Edges cut.

In the Year of Jubilee. By George Gissing. Author of "The Odd Women," "The Emancipated," etc. In Three Volumes. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, W. C. 1894.

3 Vols. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Vol. i, pp. iv + 236; Vol. ii, pp. iv + 268; Vol. iii, pp. iv + 268. Bound in blue cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

Eve's Ransom. By George Gissing. Author of "The Odd Women," "The Emancipated," "In the Year of Jubilee," etc., etc. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, W. C. 1895.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: pp. iv + 380, with a catalogue of Lawrence & Bullen's publications at end, consisting of sixteen pages. Bound in dark red cloth with white end-papers. Uncut.

The Paying Guest. By George Gissing. Author of "In the Year of Jubilee," "The Odd Women," etc. Cassell & Company, Limited. London, Paris and Melbourne. 1895.

1 Vol. Sm. Fcap. 8vo. *Collation*: pp. 160, with four pages of advertisements at end. Bound in biscuit-colored buckram with white end-papers. Uncut. Issued in Cassell's Pocket Library.

Sleeping Fires. By George Gissing. Author of "The Odd Women," "Eve's Ransom," etc. London: T. Fisher Unwin. 1895.

Small Fcap. 8vo. *Collation*: pp. 240. Bound in biscuit-colored buckram with white end-papers, top edge gilt, other edges cut. Issued in The Autongin Library. Another issue at the same time was bound in salmon-colored paper wrapper with edges cut.

The Whirlpool. By George Gissing. London: Lawrence & Bullen, Ltd., 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, W. C. 1897.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. iv + 456. Bound in dark red cloth with white end-papers. Edges uncut.

Human Odds & Ends. Stories and Sketches. By George Gissing. London: Lawrence & Bullen, Ltd., 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, 1898.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. viii + 308. Bound in dark red cloth with white end-papers. Edges uncut. It is a question if

this be really the first edition, because in 1897 the book was issued in "Bell's Indian and Colonial Library" for sale in the British Colonies. It may be that the 1898 date on the title-page of Lawrence & Bullen's edition was antedated, and that the two editions were issued towards the end of 1897. In George Bell & Sons' edition the binding is in buff paper wrapper.

THE TOWN TRAVELLER. By George Gissing. Methuen & Co., 36 Essex Street, W. C., London. 1898.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. vi + 314. At the end is Methuen's "Catalogue of Books and Announcements," consisting of 40 pages, and dated April, 1898. Bound in light red cloth, with white end-papers. Cut top, other edges uncut.

CHARLES DICKENS. A Critical Study. By George Gissing. London: Blackie & Son, Limited, 50 Old Bailey, E. C. Glasgow and Dublin. 1898.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: 2 pages of advts. + pp. 244. Bound in dark red cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

THE CROWN OF LIFE. By George Gissing. Methuen & Co., 36 Essex Street, W. C., London. 1899.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. iv + 332. At the end is Methuen's "Catalogue of Books and Announcements," consisting of 40 pages and dated September, 1899. Bound in red cloth with white end-papers. Top edge cut, other edges uncut.

BY THE IONIAN SEA. Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy. By George Gissing. With Eight Illustrations in Colour by Leo de Littrow and Others in Black and White: London, Chapman and Hall, Ltd. 1901.

1 Vol. Cr. 4to. *Collation*: Pp. viii + 168. Bound in white cloth, gilt top, with white end-papers. Uncut.

OUR FRIEND THE CHARLATAN. By George Gissing. With Illustrations by Launcelot Speed. London: Chapman and Hall, Ld. 1901.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. viii + 428. Bound in dark cloth with white end-papers. Top edge cut, others uncut.

THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF HENRY RYECROFT. By George Gissing. Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd. 2 Whitehall Gardens, 1903.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. 1 blank leaf, + xvi + 304. Bound in green cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

VERANILDA. A Romance. By George Gissing. Author of "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft," etc. London: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd. 1904.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: 1 half title leaf, pp. x + 348. At end is catalogue of Constable's books consisting of 16 pages. Bound in red cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

WILL WARBURTON. A Romance of Real Life. By George Gissing. Author of "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft," "Veranilda," "New Grub Street," "Demos," etc. London: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd., 16 James Street, Haymarket, S. W. 1905.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. 336. At end is a catalogue of Constable's publications consisting of 16 pages. Bound in red cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

THE HOUSE OF COBWEBS and Other Stories. By George Gissing. To which is prefixed "The Work of George Gissing," an Introductory Survey by Thomas Seccombe. London, Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd. 1906.

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. lvi + 300. Bound in blue cloth with white end-papers. Edges cut.

LETTERS TO EDWARD CLODD from George Gissing. London: Printed for Private Circulation. 1914.

[*Colophon*] *"London: Printed for Thomas J. Wise, Hampstead, N. W. Edition Limited to Thirty Copies."*

1 Vol. Cr. 8vo. *Collation*: Pp. 60. Bound in red paper wrapper. Uncut.

LETTERS TO AN EDITOR. By George Gissing.

[*Colophon*]*"Of this little book, twenty-five copies only have been printed by Clement Shorter for distribution among his friends. By permission of Algernon Gissing, Esq., George Gissing's brother and executor."*

1 Vol. Sm. 4to. *Collation*: Pp. 16, unnumbered. Last leaf blank. At end of colophon is given the number of the copy and Mr. Shorter's autograph signature in ink. Bound in gray paper wrapper. Edges cut.

Date Due

MAY 20 1973

JUN 20 1973

MAY 9 1978

MAY 22 1979

APR 15 1982

JAN 16 1985

MAY 05 1999

MAY 16 2007

Demco 38-297

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
[redacted]
3 2260 00101340 0
stax PR 4588.G52
Critical studies of the works of Charles

K. GAISSER, BOOKS
Fine and Scarce Books
1242 Broadway, Toledo 9, Ohio

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
3 2260 007 922 786